

ENGL 3315/CRN 14688 and AFST 3390/CRN 13051  
 African American Literature  
**Memoirs and Creative Non-Fiction**  
 M/W 9-10.20am  
 HUD 100

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Office: Hudspeth Hall, Room 321

Office hours: M/W 10.30am-12.30pm (in HUD 321), and by appointment (preferably via zoom)

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This course offers the opportunity to engage in some depth with creative nonfiction by contemporary African American writers; it also offers a chronological sampling of some of the most canonical works of creative non-fiction produced by African American authors since the 1830s. Creative Nonfiction, especially the memoir, is becoming an increasingly influential genre in the United States. The memoirs we read in this class invite readers to engage with the lived experiences of a diverse set of African Americans creative writers, scholars, and activists. In our class, we will trace African American memoirs from the slave narrative, one of the most important genres developed by African Americans in the US in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, to very contemporary texts by public intellectuals such as Ta-Nehisi Coates and Saidiya Hartman. Our syllabus covers memoirs and essays by a wide range of African American authors, who speak to some of the most pressing social, political, and cultural issues in the United States. Some of the questions we will ask about memoirs and creative non-fiction include:

- What can memoirs teach us about the complexity and diversity of African American lives?
- What do memoirs tell us about human relationships, loss, struggle, resilience, and hope?
- What are the possibilities (and limitations) of creative nonfiction in addressing some of the most pressing issues in African American communities today?
- What can memoirs and essays accomplish that fiction, drama, and poetry cannot achieve?
- Which historical continuities do memoirs address?
- What is the pedagogical and civic potential of creative non-fiction?
- What is the relationship between life writing and other arts, especially music, film, and visual art?
- How do memoirs blur and transgress boundaries between the personal and the political?
- What do these memoirs teach us about gendered experiences?
- How do these contemporary texts continue, transform, or disrupt longstanding African American literary traditions?
- What is the relationship between creative non-fiction and documentaries, and between memoirs and biopics?

Required primary texts (available at the bookstore or online):

James Baldwin. *The Fire Next Time*.

Sarah M. Broom. *The Yellow House*.

Ta-Nehisi Coates. *Between the World and Me*.

\*Saidiya Hartman. *Lose Your Mother*.

Kiese Laymon. *Heavy*.

Natasha Trethewey. *Memorial Drive: A Daughter's Memoir*

Jesmyn Ward. *Men We Reaped*.

Note: I ask you to use a **paper copy 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. 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 primary texts mentioned above with poems or scholarly essays marked with an asterisk (\*). Additional primary texts will be made available to you online on blackboard; I will ask you to find the assigned secondary sources (scholarly articles) on JSTOR or MLA/EBSCO, so you can practice researching online and we make use of these expensive digital subscriptions. Carefully read these additional texts, print them out or bring an electronic version to class, look up terminology and references, and be able to summarize the author's argument. 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. I strive to assign fewer pages for our meeting on Wednesdays.

### **Your final grade consists of 5 parts:**

1. Regular attendance and active participation in class discussions
2. 4 submissions on the discussion board on Blackboard on 4 different texts/4 different weeks
3. Film/Bipic/TVseries/Music Video/Videogame review
4. Project Proposal and Annotated Bibliography
5. Final Project

### **Attendance and participation in class discussion: 10%**

Regular attendance and active participation in class discussion and group work 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. You can earn up to 200 points for active participation in class discussion. If I notice that students are not doing the required readings, I will start doing quizzes to ensure everyone is engaged with the class materials.

Students **may miss up to four classes** (without giving me an explanation and without 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 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. If you miss a fifth class, your grade drops a letter grade. If you miss a sixth class, I will drop you.

**Submissions on BB: \_\_\_\_\_ 20%**

You are required to submit a **total of 4** entries on the discussion board over the course of the semester: Post 2 questions and 2 responses on 4 different assigned texts over the course of 4 different weeks.

- **Responses:** 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 8am on Monday, so I have time to read them before class. To get full credit you must submit a total of 2 responses over the course of the semester. It is up to you to which questions you respond; your choice depends on your own interests and your schedule, but you have to engage with at least different texts and respond to one of your peers' questions *at least once* (see below).
- **Questions:** Every week you have the opportunity to articulate you own questions on any of the readings assigned for the following Monday. These questions are due by 6pm on Friday, to give your peers enough time to read and think about them. I expect you to submit a total of 2 questions over the course of the semester.
- These questions and your responses are the best possible preparation for our discussion in class and show me where you are prepared and where your thinking is going.

Each of 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 6pm on Friday, responses are due by 8am 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 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 400 points.

**3. Film/TV/Music Video/Videogame/Art Review \_\_\_\_\_ 25%**

Each student will commit to reviewing a specific film, TV series, music video, videogame, or other narrative work of art directly related to our class. I will provide a list of films in the second week of the semester. Your review needs to follow the format and length of a professional film review in a publication like *The Atlantic* or *The New Yorker* or other relevant outlets for the text you review (see samples below) and you need to connect your review to one assigned primary text from our course. The due date of your review depends on the primary text to which you connect it. The review will be due the Friday after we finished discussing the primary text of your choice.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2023/08/passages-movie-review/674910/>

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-front-row/oppenheimer-is-ultimately-a-history-channel-movie-with-fancy-editing>

**4. Project Proposal and Annotated Bibliography \_\_\_\_\_ 10%**

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, 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 which option you choose, explaining the focus of your work and the primary text you engage, as well as the main research

questions guiding your research or creative project. Also submit citations of and annotations to at least 4 scholarly sources, 3 of which you need to have found on your own. You will also need to produce scholarly annotations if you choose the creative project. More details will follow. The proposal and annotated bibliography are **due by 6pm on Monday, November 27**. No extensions! Be sure to bring 2 hardcopies of your project proposals and annotated bibliographies to class on Wednesday, November 29, so we can effectively workshop them in small groups in class. I also strongly encourage you to **meet with me in office hours** before you embark on your project. I am happy to provide suggestions and feedback.

### **5. Final Project:** **35%**

Your final project needs to be 1500 to 2000 words (6-8 double-spaced pages) and offer either a focused and innovative thesis and analysis of contemporary nonfiction (one of the assigned primary texts) **or** a personal essay with a clearly discernible argument related to our class (perhaps on a current event connected to the topic of our class) **or** a chapter/section of a memoir, a creative option (this could be “your” memoir or you imagine writing a memoir in the voice of a historical or current figure important to you and relevant to our class). You need to cross-reference scholarly work regardless with option you choose. The creative option must be **accompanied by a scholarly reflection**. More details and examples will follow. We will workshop the first 3-4 pages of your drafts during our last class on December 6. Be sure to bring 2 hardcopies of your final drafts to class so we can effectively workshop them in small groups in class. The final project is due as a word.docx by **6pm on December 8<sup>th</sup>**.

#### Make-up and extra credit

I do not allow students to “make-up” for response paragraphs or other assignments. 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 20 points. You may submit a total of 3 extra credit assignments, for a possible total of 60 extra credit points.

#### Grade breakdown

Attendance and participation: 200 points	A= 1800-2000 or 90-100%
Submissions on BB: 400 points	B= 1600-1799 or 80-89.9%
Film review: 500 points	C= 1400-1599 or 70-79.9%
Project Proposal: 200 points	D= 1200-1399 or 60-69.9%
Final Project: 700 points	F = 0-1199 or 0-59.9%
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TOTAL: 2000 points	

#### Covid recommendations:

Please stay at home if you feel sick and cannot get access to a test. If you test positive for Covid-19, please let me know via email and I encourage you to report to [covidaction@utep.edu](mailto:covidaction@utep.edu) and to return to campus only after you were cleared by the covidaction team and/or test negative. Thank you.

A word on blackboard and email netiquette:

Please check your blackboard and your email frequently, ideally once a day. If you have any problems accessing blackboard, contact the IT help desk first. 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 your course title in the subject line, to address me in an appropriate way, and to 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 will not read or respond to emails over the weekend or during holidays. Email: [mcrohrleitner@utep.edu](mailto:mcrohrleitner@utep.edu)

Cell phones etc.

All cell phones need to be silenced and put away during class time. If you need to be reachable via cell phone for an emergency, let me know about this circumstance before class begins and put your cell phone on vibrate only. If you take notes on laptops or tablets, please put them away when I ask you to do so. Thank you.

Plagiarism:

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 any academic institution 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, 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)

AI: ChatGPT and similar platforms can be useful tools for writers and researchers; they are, however, not permitted in this course. It is crucial you find your own voice as a writer and critical thinker and do not rely on artificial intelligence to articulate your ideas; to make matters worse, AI often contains false information. I urge you to not use it for any written assignment in this course. Thank you.

Students with special needs:

If you have a documented disability and require specific accommodations, first 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>

Wednesday, August 30	<p>Introductions and syllabus            Key terms: Life writing, memoir, autobiography, personal essay            “African American”, African diaspora            * Toni Morrison. “The Site of Memory.” <i>Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir</i>.            * Hilton Als. “Introduction.” <i>The Best American Essays 2018</i>.”</p>
Monday, September 4	Labor Day. NO CLASS. Read ahead!
Wednesday, September 6	<p>* From <i>The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself</i> (1831)            * Frederick Douglass. "What, to the Slave, is the Fourth of July?" (1852)            * From <i>Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl</i> (1861)            * From <i>Life and Times of Frederick Douglass</i> (1881/1892)</p>
Monday, September 11	<p>* From <i>Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells</i> (1970)            * From <i>The Souls of Black Folk</i> (1903)            * Zora Neale Hurston. "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (1928)            * From <i>Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments</i></p>
Wednesday, September 13	<p>* From <i>To Be Young, Gifted, and Black</i> (1969)            * From <i>Assata Shakur: An Autobiography</i> (1987)</p>
Monday, September 18	<i>The Fire Next Time</i> (1963, TBA)
Wednesday, September 20	<p><i>The Fire Next Time</i> (TBA)            **<i>I Am Not Your Negro</i></p>
Monday, September 25	<i>Between the World and Me</i> (2015, TBA)
Wednesday, September 27	<i>Between the World and Me</i> (TBA)
Monday, October 2	<i>Between the World and Me</i> (TBA)
Wednesday, October 4	<i>Memorial Drive: A Daughter's Memoir</i> (2020, 1-50)
Monday, October 9	<i>Memorial Drive</i> (51-158)
Wednesday, October 11	<i>Memorial Drive</i> (159-213)
Monday, October 16	<i>Heavy: An American Memoir</i> (2018, 1-103)
Wednesday, October 18	<i>Heavy</i> (104-162)

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<sup>1</sup> Subject to change. Updates will be announced in class and posted on BB.

Monday, October 23	<i>Heavy</i> (165-241) ** <i>The Gospel According to André.</i>
Wednesday, October 25	<i>The Yellow House: A Memoir</i> (2019, 1-98) Visit by Ana Menéndez, author of <i>The Apartment</i>
Monday, October 30	<i>The Yellow House</i> (100-192)
Wednesday, November 1	NO CLASS. Annual Conference of the American Studies Association. Read ahead.
Monday, November 6	<i>The Yellow House</i> (193-311)
Wednesday, November 8	<i>The Yellow House</i> (312-372)
Monday, November 13	<i>Men We Reaped: A Memoir</i> (2013, 1-103)
Wednesday, November 15	<i>Men We Reaped</i> (104-162)
Monday, November 20	<i>Men We Reaped</i> (163-251)
Wednesday, November 22	<i>Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route</i> (2007, 3-48)
Monday, November 27	<i>Lose Your Mother</i> (49-109) Project Proposals and Annotated Bibliographies due as word. docx attachment on BB by 6pm. (non-negotiable deadline)
Wednesday, November 29	<i>Lose Your Mother</i> (110-172) Workshopping Project Proposals and Annotated
Monday, December 4	<i>Lose Your Mother</i> (173-236)
Wednesday, December 6	Review and workshopping 3-4 pages of first drafts
Friday, December 8	Dead Day Final Projects due as word.docx attachment on BB by 6pm No extensions.
Tuesday, December 19	Grades are due to be submitted by instructor.
Wednesday, December 20	Grades are available to students