



SYLLABUS

African American Nature Writers African American Nature Writers

ENGL 465/ ENSP 249 / AFST 306/AMST 350/CMST 250

Course Description

Through poetry, fiction, and non-fiction we will explore how African American artists (primarily writers with some attention to visual artists) have imagined a cultural relationship to nature. Within these various literary contexts, we will study the intersections of nature and culture in a variety of landscapes—wilderness or the “wild,” pastoral/antipastoral, urban and suburban—while also considering some of the themes and debates in the field of ecocriticism.

Course Goals

The readings, writings, and class discussions will enable students to

1. Gain an understanding of the ways in which nature is expressed through literary forms, including understanding activist writing
2. Understand the fundamentals of ecocriticism and apply its methodology to the texts under study
3. Explore and learn more about human understanding and interpretation of nature as well as the ways in which African Americans have been affected by their natural environment through time
4. Strengthen critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork, communication, and leadership skills

5. Become, overall, more proficient writers and oral communicators.

Service-learning objectives (required for CMST students, optional for all others)

Engage in useful service to individuals, organizations, schools, or other entities in the community (the service activities must relate to the subject matter of the course). Some examples are to work on “green” issues, environmental justice, community gardening, food justice and hunger issues, and others within the students’ own environmental interests.

Required Texts*

Frederick Douglass. *The Heroic Slave*. Online @
<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/DouHero.html>

Camille Dungy, Ed. *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*.

Eddy Harris. *Mississippi Solo*.

Edna Lewis. from *The Taste of Country Cooking*. Bb, etext

Toni Morrison. *Tar Baby*.

Richard Wright. “The Man Who Lived Underground.” Bb, etext

Film: Julie Dash, *Daughters of the Dust*

Etexts & web links: I have prepared a collection of material that contains additional required reading or viewing. Instructions for accessibility are included on the course calendar.



*Note: I prefer that you buy books when possible,
but if you must seek alternatives try the following sites:
Chadwyck-Healey African American Poetry 1760-1900 (Swem Library Database)

[PAL: Perspectives in American Literature](#) – A Research and Reference Guide – An Ongoing Project

Policies

Attendance: In order to learn, you must first show up. Regular, punctual attendance also fosters greater intellectual exchange and prevents class time from lapsing into lecture only. Finally, because we will spend scheduled time out of class, any other absences mean you will miss a substantial amount of work. Therefore, I have a clear attendance policy: you should sign an attendance sheet at the beginning of each class, and it is your responsibility to make sure you sign it. I will not rely on your memory or mine as evidence of your attendance. More than two absences or, since we meet only twice a week, two consecutive absences will result in your final grade being reduced by ½ of one letter grade (i.e. B to B-). If illness or other emergencies take you over the allowed absences, you must provide written documentation from the dean of students office.

Late Arrival/Early Departure: Both of these are disruptive and should be kept to a minimum. Consistent tardiness will affect your class participation grade. You should request permission prior to the start of class if you need to leave early for an important reason.

Classroom Etiquette: You should bring your reading materials and other assigned work to class and be prepared to engage fully and attentively in the discussion. No cell phones (talking, texting, or any other capabilities) allowed. You may use a laptop, kindle, or ipad for course related work only.

Grading: The final grade will be based on the following:

Blogs, 20% (in response to specific questions/ideas/texts/out-of-class lectures)

Journals, 20% (a minimum of two entries per week)

Take-home Midterm Essay, 20

Finals (Exam or Project), 25%

Class Participation, 15%

Assignments

Readings: Poetry selections and their due dates are available on Blackboard “Assignments.”

Readings are to be completed by the due dates listed on the syllabus or on Bb before you come to class. Be prepared to discuss and sometimes write about the assigned readings in class. We will not be able to discuss every reading but you are responsible for all. You must always bring a copy of the assigned texts to class whether in print or on your electronic device.

Writing: Blogs, the midterm, Option 1 journals, and the final exam will be completed and turned in electronically. The midterm essay and the written report that accompanies a final project should comply with MLA format (double spaced, one-inch margins, 12 pt. font) unless

otherwise instructed. You must also document all sources, both primary and secondary, according to MLA. You can find guidelines for documentation on Swem's website and a more complete version on [OWL](#). I will also go over the format with anyone whose discipline uses another style (APA, for instance). The final exam, if anyone opts to take it, will be administered electronically.

- 1) Journals* - you have two options for completing a journal.

Option 1 should be a twice-weekly (minimum) record of ideas, personal observations, responses to texts, questions and critiques of readings and course content, and/or news and events that relate to the subject under study. It will be graded primarily on content but you should still keep grammatical errors and typos to a minimum. Keep in mind that you will be sharing your journals in class at times so make sure your entries are appropriate. These will be turned in electronically on the dates indicated on your course calendar.

Option 2 should be an honest-to-goodness nature journal kept in a tree-free or recycled journal notebook. Barnes and Noble has a nice selection of “green” journals to choose from or you can order one from <http://www.ecopaper.com/journals>. If you choose this option, it should be an on-going record of "nature" as you observe it in a place of interest to you. It might be a favorite spot on campus, a park, a nearby neighborhood, or your own backyard if you commute—whatever place you choose, it must be a place that you visit regularly (twice-weekly minimum).

Be as creative as you like—you might sometimes write poems about your place, make sketches, create brief stories (vignettes). You will always consider how it changes each time you visit, what the temperature is, how you feel when you go there, whether or not your mood changes, and so on. Or you might try to apply our readings and discussions to your entries. Although your entries will be handwritten, they must be legible. As with option one, keep in mind that you will be sharing your journals often in class so make sure your entries are appropriate.

Although you will turn in your journals periodically throughout the semester, they will be graded at the end of the semester as exceptional (A), very good (A-), good (B+), satisfactory (B), fair (B-). Evaluations will be lower for incomplete and/or illegible journals.

*Note: If you are a CMST student your journals should reflect your planning and development regarding your community involvement.

- 2) Instructions for the mid-term essay will be handed out in class the week before it is due. It will take the form of several questions, of which you will choose two and write 4-5 pages on each (for a total of 8-10 pages).

- 3) Blogs will be due as indicated on the syllabus in response to a question or issue presented by the instructor. They will include both a response to the question/issue and a comment on a response by at least one of your fellow class members.
- 4) Whatever option you choose for your final, a written component must be part of it. More specific instructions tba.

NOTE: Late assignments, without prior permission of the instructor, will reduce the grade of the assignment by one full letter grade for each class period it is late.

All assignments (with the exception of impromptu in-class work)_must be submitted in order to pass the course.

COURSE CALENDAR

Reading assignments such as short essays or comparative literature may be provided from time to time but no major texts will be added to the syllabus.

Short in-class writings (1-3 or 10 minutes) may be included throughout the semester but no major paper assignments will be added.

Week 1

R 8/29: Introduction & Semester Overview

Week 2

T 9/3: Short lecture (approx. 20 min) on ecocriticism

- “Touching the Earth,” bell hooks; (anchor text for the course)

VISIONS OF NATURE IN ANTI-SLAVERY LITERATURE

-Frederick Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, Parts I & II

<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/DouHero.html>

-Complete “Reading Form” for the hooks essay and be prepared to discuss in class: Answer the following questions on *The Heroic Slave* for discussion (not submission): 1) How Would you characterize Madison Washington and Mr. Listwell, 2) Describe each man’s Relationship to nature, and 3) If nature is itself a “character” in the story, what role does It play?

-Begin this week writing in journals at least twice each week.

R 9/5: Cont. *The Heroic Slave*, Parts III & IV

-Blog 1 due by 11 p.m. on W 9/4 (See Bb “blogs” for specific questions)

Week 3

T 9/10: NO CLASS - Link will be emailed for out-of-class lecture on the following:

Toomer, "Song of the Son" at

<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/song-of-the-son/>

In *Black Nature*: Horton, "On Summer" 10-11; McClellan, "A Septemer Night" 22; Wheatley, "On Imagination," 149-50; Whitman, from *Rape of Florida*, 162-65; also Read essay "We Must be Careful," 3-5

-Read "Analytical Questions" on Bb "Course Documents" and then formulate one question on any of the readings for class discussion on Thursday (please email your questions to me by Noon on 9/12)

R 9/12: Discussion of poems assigned on 9/10 and your discussion questions

Week 4

T 9/17: NATURE'S PARADOXES

Readings: Toomer, "Karintha" @

<http://cockscrow.com/rooster/toomer.html> ; "November Cotton Flower" @

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/175685>; "Blood Burning Moon" @

<http://english204-dcc.blogspot.com/2011/04/blood-burning-moon-toomer.html>

-Blog 2 due by 11 p.m. on Monday 9/16 for today's discussion (See Bb "blogs" for Specific questions)

R 9/19: *Black Nature*: essay "Disasters, Nature, and Poetry," 179-83; poems, Clifton, "the earth Is a living thing," 6; Patterson, "The Mountain Road Ends Here," 8; Horton, "On Summer," 10; Hayden, "The Night-Blooming Cereus," 19; "A Plague of Starlings," 128; "Ice Storm," 211

-Submit first set of journal entries by email for option 1 and to my mailbox for option 2 (minimum of six entries)

Week 5

T 9/24: Eugenia Collier, "Marigolds" @

http://www.nexuslearning.net/books/holt_elements_of_lit-3/Collection%204/marigolds%20p1.htm

-Blog 3 due by 11 p.m. on Monday 9/23 for today's discussion (see Bb "blogs" for Specific questions – tba)

R 9/26: *Black Nature*, Helene Johnson, "Metamorphism," 25; Anne Spencer, "White Things" 155; Askia M. Toure, "Floodtide," 184; Jean Toomer, "Reapers," 203; Ishmael Reed, "Earthquake Blues," 204

-Class discussion

Week 6

T 10/1: URBAN EXPERIENCES

Richard Wright, "The Man Who Lived Underground," Part 1 (Bb "etexts")

-Class Discussion

-Project Proposals Due

-Pick up midterm questions

R 10/3: NO CLASS – view taped lecture on “Underground,” Part 2

Week 7 (No journal entries necessary this week)

T 10/8: Ed Roberson, "Urban Nature," 65; Major Jackson, "Urban Renewal: XIII," 77; "Pest," 117; Thomas Sayers Ellis, "The Market," 123; Tara Betts, "For Those Who Need a True Story," 124; Lucille Clifton, "the beginning of the end of the world," 141; Nikki Giovanni, "For Sandra," 151; G. E. Patterson, "The Natural World," 153

-Class discussion of Urban Experiences, including “Underground”

R 10/10 FAMILY TIES & INFLUENCE

In-class video on Edna Lewis: “Fried Chicken and Sweet Potato Pie”

-*Black Nature*: Wright, from *12 Million Black Voices*, 71-73

-Midterm Essay due by 11 p.m. (you have had two weeks to complete this assignment; do not miss class to work on paper)

Week 8

T 10/15: FALL BREAK

R 10/17: Edna Lewis, from *The Taste of Country Cooking* – entire excerpt, Bb “etexts”

-Blog 4 due by 11 p.m. on Wednesday 10/16 (See Bb “blogs” tba)

-Submit second set of journal entries (minimum of 6 additional entries, for total of 12)

Week 9

T 10/22: MIGRATION, NOSTALGIA, AND ROOTEDNESS: THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE

-*Black Nature*: Jeffers, “April in Eatonton,” 249-51

-Morrison, *Tar Baby*, Foreword & Chs. 1-5

-NO CLASS – view taped lecture & email 1 discussion question by 11 p.m. 10/23

R 10/24: Discuss text and taped lecture

Week 10

T 10/29: *Tar Baby*, Chs. 6-end; conclude discussion

R 10/31: NO CLASS: View film *Daughters of the Dust* for discussion 11/5

-Complete “Analyzing Film” worksheet (Bb “Course Documents”) for class discussion; email copy of completed worksheet to me

Week 11

T 11/5: Margaret Walker, "Sorrow Home," 99; "Southern Song," 270; "My Mississippi Spring," 347; Richard Wright, "#459," 122; Patricia S. Jones, "San Francisco, Spring 1986," 197-98

R 11/7: Natasha Trethaway, "Liturgy," 201-02; Al Young, "Pachuta, Miss/A Memoir," 317; Marilyn Nelson, "My Grandfather Walks in the Woods," 298; Ruth Ellen Kocher, "At 57, My Father Learns to Grow Things," 305

Week 12

T 11/12: "TOUCHING THE EARTH" (as theme)

NO CLASS – view taped lecture on visual artists

Blog 5 due by 11 p.m. on Wed. 11/13 tba

R 11/14: Frank X. Walker, "Homeopathic," 309; Terrance Hayes, "Root," 310-11; Audre Lorde, "What My Child Learns of the Sea," 312; Joanne Gavvin, "For Alexis," 330-32; essay, Dungy, "Writing Home," 283-85 – Class discussion

Week 13

T 11/19: Remica L. Bingham, "The Ritual of Season," 313-14; James A. Emanuel; "For a Farmer," 39; James W. Johnson, "Deep in the Quiet Wood," 335; Alice Dunbar-Nelson, "Violets," 336; Anne Spencer, "[Earth, I Thank You]" 325 – Class discussion

R 11/21: Harris, *Mississippi Solo*, Chs. 1-17 – Class discussion

Week 14

T 11/26: NO CLASS – view taped lecture on *Solo*

-Blog 6 due by 11 p.m. Mon. 12/2

11/27-12/1: THANKSGIVING BREAK

Week 15 (no journal entries necessary for last week of classes)

T 12/3: Cont. *Solo*, Chs. 18-26 - Class discussion

R 12/5: *Solo*, Chs. 27-end

-Submit last set of Journal entries (an additional 12 for a total of 24)

Finals Schedule

See Instructions for Exams/Projects