

English 254

Katy Ryan, ENGL 254, Fall 2001, African American Literature

ENG 254: African American Literature: The Music of Political Protest

Katy Ryan
Stansbury 354
Phone: 293-3107 x424
email: kohearnr@wvu.edu
Office Hours: Tues. / Thurs. 1:15-2:15 and by appt.

Course Description

The history of published literature by people of African descent in the United States begins with a book of poems: in 1773, Phillis Wheatley published *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. Today, multiple black literary traditions have emerged--from rural and urban areas, different economic classes, various ethnic and religious histories, and opposing political allegiances. This introductory class focuses on the struggle for social and personal liberation in mid-nineteenth through twentieth-century literature. That is, we will be primarily concerned with literary texts that represent black survival in a country founded on and defined by white supremacy. We will begin with Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861)--a memoir and abolitionist text--and conclude with Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight* (1994)--a performance piece created from interviews with people who were involved in the 1992 L.A. Riots.

One of our tasks will be to consider how different literary forms (the memoir, novel, poem, essay, performance piece) encourage readers / spectators / audiences to engage with the philosophy and spirit of resistance. How can artistic work move people to work for justice? We will also listen to recordings from early twentieth-century blues and jazz artists as well as contemporary rap and hip-hop performers. The conjunction between literary and musical genres will help us to define both formal aesthetics and movements for radical social change.

Requirements

This course will demand a great deal of reading, writing, working together, and imagining. Written responses to the readings (2 double-spaced pages, or approx. 500 words) are due every other week. You can focus on a specific idea, argument, image, character, or theme in a text; or, you can focus on the overall work. These informal and creative meditations are a chance for you to consider the readings before coming to class. **As the semester progresses, your responses should become more analytical and should offer connections between the readings.** Feel free to use the first-person pronoun. At the end of the semester, I will collect (again) all **7 responses** and give you a grade for the entire group. You will have the opportunity to revise two responses.

There will be occasional unannounced quizzes on the readings. Each student will also be in a group that will collaborate on a class performance. These ten-minute performances do not have to be professionally acted and should not cause you any anxiety. At all. Think of your performance as a gift to the class. It is simply a chance for you, in a different way than writing, to raise questions about the readings and to present a shared vision of the course material. You can bring props, use music, involve the audience, rearrange the classroom. You will have some time in class to prepare but each group will also have to meet at least once outside of class.

On the final take-home examination, you will be asked to synthesize course material and compose responses to essay questions. **In order to do well on the final, you must have**

attended class regularly. Our conversations will shape the exam questions.

Course Goals:

To experience some of the voices of mid-nineteenth through twentieth-century African American literature

To analyze the history of slavery and black survival in the United States

To consider how literature can be a form of social protest

To work with other students to produce imaginative, intelligent, and creative performances

To strengthen your ability to write cogent and insightful responses to literature

Grading

Seven Responses 40%

Performance/Attendance 20%

Final Exam 25%

Quizzes 15%

Required Texts:

Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), *The Dutchman*

John Wideman, *Philadelphia Fire*

Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*

Recommended Texts: (*available at bookstore)

James Baldwin, *Notes on a Native Son; The Fire Next Time*

Toni Cade, *Gorilla, My Love; The Black Woman* (ed.)

Charles Chestnutt, *Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales**; *Marrow of Tradition*

Angela Davis, *Women, Race, & Class*

Mari Evans, ed. *Black Women Writers*

Maureen Honey, *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance*

George Jackson, *Soledad Brother Gayl Jones, Corrigadora; Eva's Man*

Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye; *Sula; Tar Baby; *Song of Solomon; *Beloved; Jazz; Paradise*

Assata Shakur, *Assata*

Barbara Smith, *The Truth That Never Hurts*

Malcolm X, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*

Richard Wright, *Native Son; Black Boy*

Calendar

Tues Aug 21: Introductions

Spirituals: "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," "Go Down Moses," "St. Louis Blues,"

"Hard Times Blues," "Backwater Blues"

Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong, "St. Louis Blues," "Reckless Blues," "I Ain't Gonna Play No Second Fiddle"

A Community Story

Thurs Aug 23: Toni Morrison, Nobel Prize Speech

Jacobs, *Incidents* Valerie Smith's Introduction (xxvii-xi)

Tues Aug 28: Incidents Childhood-A Perilous Passage (11-89)

Thurs Aug 30: Incidents Tie to New Life-The Flight (90-149)

1st Reader Response

Tues Sept 4: Incidents Months of Peril-Preparations for Escape (150-236)

Thurs Sept 6: Incidents Northward Bound-Appendix

Speeches, Essays, and Tales

Tues Sept 11: Sojourner Truth, "Address to the First Annual Meeting of the American Equal Rights Association"

Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?"

Thurs Sept 13: "The Bear and the Rabbit," "Tar Baby"

Charles Chestnutt, from Conjure Woman, "The Goophered Grapevine" and "Po' Sandy"

Performance Group

2nd Response Due

Tues Sept 18 (Rosh Hashannah): W.E.B. DuBois, from The Souls of Black Folk

Thurs Sept 20: Martin Luther King, Jr., "Beyond Vietnam" and "Eulogy for the Young Victims of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Bombing"

The Harlem Renaissance and Contemporary Poetry

Tues Sept 25: Helene Johnson, "Bottled," "Sonnet to a Negro in Harlem," "Magalu"

Gwendolyn Bennett, "To Usward," "To a Dark Girl," "Heritage"

Thurs Sept 27: Angelina Weld Grimke, "The Black Finger," "The Want of You," "El Beso"

Jessie Faucet, "Fragment," "Oriflamme"

Langston Hughes, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "Aunt Sue's Stories," "Negro," "When Sue Wears Red," "Dreams," "Jazzonia"

3rd Response Due

Performance Group

Tues Oct 2: Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Boy Died in My Alley"

Sonia Sanchez, "Blk/Rhetoric," "Summer Words for a Sistuh Addict"

Gil Scott-Heron, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised"

Michael Harper, "American History"

Thurs Oct 4: June Jordan, "Poem about my Rights"

Audre Lorde, "Stations," "Power" Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference"

Barbara Smith, "Doing It From Scratch: The Challenge of Black Lesbian Organizing"

Performance Group

Two Novels and Two Short Stories

Tues Oct 9: Their Eyes Were Watching God Chapters 1-5 (9-80)

Thurs Oct 11: Their Eyes Were Watching God Chapters 6-12 (81-173)

4th Response Due

Tues Oct 16: Their Eyes Were Watching God Chapters 13-18 (174-248)

Performance Group

Thurs Oct 18: Their Eyes Were Watching God

Tues Oct 23: Richard Wright, "The Man Who Was Almost a Man"
Abbey Lincoln, "Bird Alone"

Thurs Oct 25: James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues"
Thelonius Monk, from Solo
Miles Davis, from In a Silent Way and Kind of Blue

5th Response Due

Tues Oct 29: Invisible Man

Thurs Nov 1: Invisible Man
Louis Armstrong, "Black and Blue" (Fats Waller)

Tues Nov 6: Invisible Man

Performance Group

6th Response Due

Contemporary Political Performances: The Fire Next Time

Thurs Nov 8: Public Enemy, "Fight the Power"
Queen Latifah, "U.N.I.T.Y."
Patricia J. Williams, "What if George W. Bush Were Black?"
Philadelphia Fire Part One (1-96)

Tues Nov 13: Philadelphia Fire Part Two (97-151)

Thurs Nov 15: Philadelphia Fire Part Three
Sonia Sanchez, "elegy for Move and Philadelphia"
Nikki Finney, "The Sound of Burning Hair"

Performance Group

Thanksgiving Holiday

Tues Nov 27: The Dutchman

7th Reader Response Due

Thurs Nov 29: The Dutchman (film)

Tues Dec 4: Twilight

Performance Group

Thurs Dec 6: Twilight

Take-home final examination is due Tues. Dec 11. 2:00 PM

Performance Groups

Thurs Sept 13:

"The Bear and the Rabbit," "Tar Baby"

Charles Chestnutt, from Conjure Woman, "The Goophered Grapevine" and "Po' Sandy"

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Thurs Sept 27:

Angelina Weld Grimke, "The Black Finger," "The Want of You," "El Beso"

Jessie Faucet, "Fragment," "Oriflamme"

Langston Hughes

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Thurs Oct 4:

June Jordan, "Poem about my Rights"

Audre Lorde, "Stations," "Power"

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Tues Oct 16:

Their Eyes Were Watching God

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

- 4.
- 5.

Thurs Nov 1:
Invisible Man

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Thurs Nov 15:
Philadelphia Fire

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Tues Dec 4:
Twilight

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.