

English 541 A
Contemporary Literature: **Black Speculative Fiction**
Spring 2019

Monday, 3:30 - 6:20 pm
Smith Hall, room 109

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Prof. Ibrahim
Office: 304 A, Padelford Hall
Office Hours: Wednesday, 3:00 – 5:00 pm & by appointment

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Course Description

This course focuses on the broad genre of speculative fiction—which encompasses various subcategories, including afro-futurism, science fiction, and neo-slave narratives—in order to explore its uses for advancing and expounding upon the historical questions and theoretical concerns that currently shape “black studies.” As an interdisciplinary knowledge project in the humanities, scholarship in black studies examines various cultural objects and forms in order to generate knowledge about how and to what effect “blackness” has been constituted as a social category nationally and across the western hemisphere, from early modernity and onward. Over the last thirty years, a dominant concern within this interdisciplinary location has been with thinking new approaches to engaging the historical past, which would supplement conventionally historicist methods for examining the archival records of transatlantic slavery. If the particular challenge that black studies engages is to produce knowledge that exceeds or breaks away from dominant narratives of and about western modernity, then a central question that arises from this challenge is: which objects, interpretive methods, and epistemological presumptions mediate the past and present? Further, if, as David Scott suggests, “time” can be thought to break from the linear schema of “history,” then how do we account for the historical temporalities that result from such breaking? To the degree that black studies can be understood as a speculative project—one that reaches for ways to conceptualize the modern human, “beyond Man’s meanings”—this course examines this aspect of the field by focusing on genres that forefront the question of time.

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Text Books and Assigned Readings

Required reading available on Canvas:

Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts” (2008)
Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987)

Required texts are available at University Book Store on the Ave:

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)
Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001)

Octavia Butler, *Dawn* (1979)
_____ *Bloodchild and Other Stories* (2005)
Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake* (2016)
Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (2017)
Samuel Delany, *Aye, and Gomorrah and Other Stories* (2003)
N.K. Jemisin, *How Long 'Til Black Future Month?* (2018)

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Learning Accommodations: If you would like to ask for learning accommodations as a result of a disability, please contact Disability Resources for Students: 448 Schmitz, (206) 543-8924. If you have a letter from Disability Resources for Students indicating that you have a disability and need accommodations, please see me, so that we can discuss appropriate methods of assistance.

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Course Requirements:

The requirements for this course fall into four categories:

Final essay: (50%)
In-class participation (25%)
Analytical Responses (25%)

- **The final essay** will be between approximately 10 pages. Your paper topic you should be in some way related to the course topic, even if you choose to address a text not assigned in this course. Submitting papers that were written in other courses will be considered plagiarism, and treated as such. All work written outside of class must be typewritten in 12 point, Times New Roman font, double-spaced, with one-inch margins. **Late assignments will not be accepted.**
- **In-class participation** requires making contributions to class discussions on a frequent basis, demonstrating preparedness when it comes to discussing reading assignments, and volunteering to begin a class session with a brief presentation on an assigned reading. Each student will be asked to begin the day's class discussion with a presentation. The components of this presentation include: 1) providing an overview of the readings assigned for the day, which could entail a brief summary of the reading's arguments and stakes, or a key insight that arises from the reading, 2) pointing to specific page numbers or passages in the text that direct our attention to key arguments, insights, etc., and 3) offering two questions to open our discussion. Your presentation should be brief, or between 5 and 10 minutes.
- **Analytical responses** are written at home and submitted on Canvas Sunday evening at 5pm, prior to our class meeting. They should be approximately one page (or no more than two pages), and should focus on one aspect of the assigned reading—the implications of an argument, a close reading of a passage, an engagement with underlying assumptions, an insight that you'd like to expound upon, for instance. When you are scheduled to present on the Monday prior to this assignment, you are still obligated to submit this assignment.

Breaches of academic integrity (i.e., plagiarism) will result in severe disciplinary action. Please see what constitutes academic misconduct in the Student Conduct Code for the University of Washington (particularly item 3c): <http://www.washington.edu/admin/rules/policies/WAC/478-120-024.html>. Please keep all cell phone ring tones off while in class. Please refrain from personal (not class-related) computer or phone use while in class. Finally, please note that the classroom is an intellectually inclusive space. Course content and discussion may not always be comfortable, but classroom etiquette requires all of us to listen and respond to each other with thoughtfulness and respect.

Course Schedule (subject to change):

Please note: readings with an asterisk (*) can be found under “Files” on Canvas

Week One: Black Historiography and Temporality

Mon. 4/1: Overview of the course
Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”

Week Two: Gender and the Route to Modern Blackness

Mon. 4/8: Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”
Octavia Butler, “Bloodchild” and “Amnesty” from *Bloodchild and Other Stories*

Due Sun, 4/7: analytical response to this week’s readings.

Week Three: The Zone of Nonbeing

Mon. 4/15: Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

Due Sun, 4/14: analytical response to this week’s readings.

Week Four: The Time of the Ship

Mon. 4/22: Octavia Butler, *Dawn* (first book in the trilogy, *Lilith’s Brood*)

Due Sun, 4/21: analytical response to this week’s readings.

Week Five: Structuring of Black Time

Mon. 4/29: Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*

Due Sun, 4/28: analytical response to this week's readings.

*****Due Sun, 4/28: One-page essay abstract and a brief bibliography.**

Week Six: The Reason of Unreason

Mon. 5/6: Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*

Due Sun, 5/5: analytical response to this week's readings.

Week Seven: Black Speculative Geographies

Mon. 5/13: Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*

Due Sun, 5/12: analytical response to this week's readings.

Week Eight: Subjects and Subjection

Mon. 5/20: Samuel Delany, *Aye, and Gomorrah* (focus on "The Star Pit," "Aye, and Gomorrah," "Time Considered as a Helix of Semi-Precious Stones")

Due Sun, 5/19: analytical response to this week's readings.

Week Nine

Mon. 5/27: Memorial Day: No Class

Week Ten: Black Futures

Mon. 6/3: N.K. Jemisin, *How Long 'Til Black Future Month?*

Due Sun, 6/2: analytical response to this week's readings.

Final Essays Due: Wednesday, June 12th, by 5:00pm.