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### ENG 2705-600: African-American Literature

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*Eastern Illinois University*

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Spring 2021 / English 2705-600

## African-American Literature

Professor Angela Vietto, 3341 Coleman Hall

Office: 217-581-2428 / Cell: 217-549-3203 (9 am – 9 pm, calls or texts welcome) /

[arvietto@eiu.edu](mailto:arvietto@eiu.edu) Virtual office hours by appointment (see bookable calendar link in D2L “Contacting Instructor”)

**Course Description:** In this course, we will study literature by African-American writers, from the earliest known texts through the present day. We will read and discuss fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and to a lesser extent, drama. The literary and artistic qualities of these works as well as their historical, social, and political context will be our focus.

In one semester, we can't possibly read even all the best-known works from four centuries. I'll try to fill in the gaps by letting you know about texts that we're not reading together, and I hope that will help you start a list of works you want to read in the future.

For the record, here's the official catalog description: “Introduction of African-American literature in its socio-cultural and historical contexts, with emphasis on such writers as Douglass, Hurston, Hughes, Wright, Ellison, Baldwin, Baraka, Morrison, Walker, Wilson.”

**Note about the content:** There will be challenging content in our readings. That's in part because the historical realities out of which African-Americans have written have so often been challenging--difficult to learn about, but even more difficult to live through. In addition, contemporary literature often includes explicit discussions of sexuality. Please be aware that you may be reading material that is difficult, and do what you need to take good care of yourself as you proceed through the course. If you want to talk with me to decompress, I'm available to do that, and it's a fine reason to ask to meet.

**Technology:** You will need regular access to the Internet, ideally from a computer rather than a phone. If your Internet access is unreliable and you are living on campus or in the local area, in addition to public computer labs, you can make arrangements to use one of the two computer classrooms in the English Department. You will also need to be able to make a video for your final presentation. D2L makes this pretty easy, but if you don't have a device that can record, once again, get in touch and we'll solve the problem.

**Learning Objectives:** In successfully completing this course, students will

1. Further develop their skill in reading literary works thoughtfully and critically;
2. Further develop their ability to write analytically, demonstrating and developing understanding of how social, cultural, and artistic trends shape works of literature;
3. Further develop their research abilities and skill in multi-source writing
4. Become familiar with major works of African-American literature and the history of African-American literature.

**Students with disabilities:** If you have a documented disability and wish to receive academic accommodations, please contact the Office of Disability Services (581-6583) as soon as possible.

**We can do this!** For some of you, online courses may be extra challenging. Whether you love the online format or not, I'm glad you're here, and I want to help you make this course work for you. While I'm building in all the strategies I can to support you in effective learning in this format, I also want you to know that you can reach out to me any time you need additional support.

### **Texts from TRS (see note below)**

- Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (published 1861; memoir of Jacobs' life, born in 1813)
- James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (published 1912, set in late 1800s/early 1900s)
- Nella Larsen, *Passing* (published 1929; set primarily in the 1920s)
- Langston Hughes, *The Ways of White Folks* (published 1934)
- Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (published 1979; set in 1976, with time travel to before 1865)
- Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (published 1987; set in 1873-1875 with flashbacks to about a hundred years)
- Percival Everett, *Erasure* (published 2001; set in the 1990s)
- Tayari Jones, *Leaving Atlanta* (published 2002; set in 1979-1980)

**Note:** For some of the TRS texts, we will be reading only sections of the book, and in one case you will choose which of three novels you read. We will also have quite a few readings that will be provided in D2L rather than through TRS.

**The Student Success Center:** Students who are having difficulty achieving their academic goals are encouraged to contact the Student Success Center (<http://www.eiu.edu/~success>) for assistance with time management, test taking, note taking, avoiding procrastination, setting goals, and other skills to support academic achievement. The Student Success Center provides individualized consultations. To make an appointment, call 217-581-6696, or go to 9th Street Hall, Room 1302.

**Academic Integrity:** Students are expected to maintain principles of academic integrity and conduct as defined in EIU's Code of Conduct (<http://www.eiu.edu/judicial/studentconductcode.php>). Violations will be reported to the Office of Student Standards.

**The Electronic Writing Portfolio:** Any written project of 750 words or longer written for this class would be suitable for submission to the EWP. Submissions must be made by the last day of finals week at the end of the semester. *Earlier deadlines apply for graduating seniors.*

**English Teacher Education Majors:** Students seeking Teacher Certification in English Language Arts should provide each of their English Department professors with a copy of the yellow form called "Application for English Department Approval to Student Teach" before the end of the semester. These forms are available in a rack outside the office of Dr. Melissa Ames (3821 Coleman Hall).

**The English Department Statement on Plagiarism:** Any teacher who discovers an act of plagiarism—"The appropriation or imitation of the language, ideas, and/or thoughts of another author, and representation of them as one's own original work" (*Random House Dictionary of the English Language*)—has the right and responsibility to impose upon the guilty student an appropriate penalty, up to and including immediate assignments of a grade of F for the assigned essay and a grade of F for the course, and to report the incident to the Office of Student Standards. Respect for the work of others should encompass all formats, including print, electronic, and oral sources.

In addition to avoiding plagiarism in all your work, please do your own thinking for your reading responses (that is, if you're tempted to look at web sites that "explain" works of literature instead of responding out of your own engagement and analysis, just don't). That doesn't mean you can't look up words in the dictionary, or look up historical facts that interest you—these can be useful things to do while reading.

|                                  |     |
|----------------------------------|-----|
| Reading and engagement / quizzes | 50% |
| Multi-stage essay                | 30% |
| Final presentation               | 10% |
| Final exam                       | 10% |

|   |                  |
|---|------------------|
| A | 90-100%          |
| B | 80-89.99%        |
| C | 70-79.99%        |
| D | 60-69.99%        |
| F | 59.99% and below |

**Reading and engagement:** The main work of a literature course is reading and thinking carefully about the reading. It's an individual process that requires active engagement from students, since your analytical—and creative—responses to the literature are where much of the learning happens. My job is to give you context and support for your reading, to guide you to push your analysis further, and to help you with difficult spots. But the work of reading and thinking is yours. It's important and time consuming. That's why it's 50% of your grade.

Of course, I can't look in your head and grade the quality of the thinking there. So the grades in this category will be based on the ways you demonstrate your careful reading and thinking. Grades will be assigned for each reading (or for sections of longer readings like novels, or groups of very short readings). **For each discussion, you may choose to make a discussion posting in writing or via video note, or you may choose to participate in a small-group discussion via video conference** (which I'll record and add to the discussion postings). For any discussion, though, you'll need to bring one or more observations of your own (as well as, possibly, questions). In our orientation week, I'll give you guidelines to help you understand the kinds of observations that will help us all develop a deeper understanding. This category will also include a few required check-in meetings with me (by phone or video conference).

**Multi-stage essay:** More detailed guidelines will be provided, and we will work on the essay in stages throughout the semester. But here's an overview.

First: I've designed this essay so that it can, ideally, do two things: allow you to relate literature to something else you care about and help you develop research and analysis skills and demonstrate them. I hope you'll keep the learning goals in mind as you approach the essay, and remember that if things are working right, you should be enjoying and invested in the project. If you're not, let's talk.

In this major essay, I ask you to engage with one or more of the texts we read in several ways. *All essays must include some textual analysis, and in addition, your essay should engage with the text in at least two of the following ways:* (a) comparative analysis with another art form, (b) analysis of the relationship of the text to a specific historical context (which must go beyond what we discussed in class), (c) a creative response, and/or (d) analysis of the relationship of the text to an event or debate in current U.S. culture. You may divide your essay into sections, but the sections should be related to each other and it's not necessary (except in the case of a creative response) to have sections at all, as long as all the elements are present.

Your thoughtful analysis is key, but you will also need to inform yourself beyond our course material. So the essay will involve use of external sources. I'll ask you to collect and review sources with me for different elements of the essay at points during the semester, so that this doesn't become a hurry-up task at the end of the course. Sources must be used responsibly and documented according to MLA, APA, or another documentation format, depending on what you're most familiar with.

**Final presentation:** More detailed guidelines will be provided in D2L. This will be a presentation based on your multi-stage essay, presented as a video (or an audio recording with accompanying slides, if we can't make video work for you for some reason).

**Final exam:** The format of the final exam will be determined by about mid-term, depending on how reading and discussion in the class are going.

## **Overview & Key Dates (specific readings listed in D2L)**

|                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>M Jan 11</b>     | First day of classes                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Jan 11-17</b>    | <b>Introductions, orientation to course, historical and literary overview</b>                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>M Jan 18</b>     | Martin Luther King, Jr. Day observed                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Jan 19-Feb 7</b> | <b>Reading: <i>Origins to the Civil War (1619-1865)</i>. Also during this unit: <i>Discussion/selection of starting point for semester project &amp; first individual check-in with instructor.</i></b>                          |
| <b>T Feb 2</b>      | Personal wellness day                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Feb 8 -21</b>    | <b>Reading: <i>Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance (1865-1919)</i>. Also during this unit: <i>Work on first stage of research for semester project</i></b>                                                                  |
| <b>F Feb 12</b>     | Lincoln's Birthday observed                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Feb 22-Mar 7</b> | <b>Reading: <i>Harlem Renaissance (New York and beyond, 1919-1940)</i>. Also during this unit: <i>Continue work on research for semester project</i></b>                                                                         |
| <b>W Feb 24</b>     | Personal wellness day                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Mar 8-21</b>     | <b>Reading: <i>Realism, Naturalism, Modernism (1940-1960)</i>. Also during this unit: <i>Continue work on research or creative response for semester project; begin drafting some part of essay &amp; mid-term check-in.</i></b> |
| <b>R Mar 18</b>     | Personal wellness day                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Mar 22-Apr 4</b> | <b>Reading: <i>The Black Arts Era (1960-1979)</i>. Also during this unit: <i>Continue work on research or creative response for semester project; begin drafting some part of essay.</i></b>                                     |
| <b>W Apr 7</b>      | Personal wellness day                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Apr 5-25</b>     | <b>Reading: <i>Contemporary</i>. Also during this unit: <i>Continue work on research or creative response for semester project; work on drafting; consult &amp; get feedback from instructor as desired.</i></b>                 |
| <b>R Apr 22</b>     | Personal wellness day                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Apr 26-30</b>    | <b>Writing and revision of final project</b>                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>F Apr 30</b>     | Last day of classes                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>R May 6</b>      | <b><u>Final exam due</u></b>                                                                                                                                                                                                     |