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# ENG 5061D-001: Topics in Literature and Literary Theory

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# ENG 5061D: The Contemporary African-American History Play

spring 2018

Dr. Chris Wixson



“History is time that won’t quit.” —Suzan-Lori Parks

## course philosophy

This seminar anchors its focus on history plays by three generations of African-American playwrights, August Wilson, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, and Suzan-Lori Parks. Wilson’s ambitious “Pittsburgh cycle” chronicles his vision of the African-American experience through each decade of the twentieth-century. Parks is currently at work on her own epic play cycle (in nine parts), inspired by Homer’s *The Odyssey* and stretching from the Civil War to the present day. Jacobs-Jenkins’ innovative adaptations of old canonical plays have drawn significant critical acclaim. Our primary task will be to read (and, whenever possible, see) plays by each that take the past as their setting — living in the language together and responding meaningfully to the choices made by these three brilliant storytellers. We will be particularly attentive to the ways in which the plays speak to one another in dialogue about the legacies of histories and cultures as well as notions of collective and personal identity. Time will be devoted as well to staging some productive collisions with texts by Ta-Nehisi Coates, Yancey Ford, Spike Lee, and Toni Morrison. Requirements include dedicated participation in discussion and *both* scholarly and creative projects. Teachers will find this course especially useful as Wilson’s plays are taught fairly often in high schools.

We will begin our conversation with short selections as a way to establish the questions we will ask of the plays.

## Learning Outcomes

1. To provide strategies for reading, analyzing, and appreciating works of contemporary African-American drama for the insight they provide about the genre and our culture.
2. To allow each member of the class to engage the significant issues and questions raised by the texts through writing, research, creativity, and class discussion.
3. To assist in the development of skills of critical reading, analytical thinking, and argumentative writing.

## course texts

*Father Comes Home From the Wars*, Suzan-Lori Parks

*The Piano Lesson* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, August Wilson

Shorter Pieces s by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Yance Ford,

Suzan-Lori Parks, Spike Lee, and Toni Morrison

## contact information

Dr. Chris Wixson

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Coleman Hall 3771

Office Hours: TR 8:30-10:30 and by appointment

## final grades

Your final grade in the course will be determined by your performance on the following assignments:

Four Short Papers /In-class Writings /Active Participation	30%
Midterm Essay	20%
Individual Critical Project	25%
Final Group Project	25%

## attendance

Mandatory.

I expect you to be in class awake and prepared every Tuesday evening. Because so much in this course relies upon in-class work, absences will adversely affect your course performance. Attendance will be taken at each class session – you are allowed **one** unexcused absence before your grade is negatively affected. **Three unexcused absences will result in a “0” for participation. More than four unexcused absences will result in a grade of no credit for the course. Habitual lateness (beyond once) will also affect your grade negatively since it is disruptive and disrespectful.** Please notify me by email if there is unexpected illness or an emergency that causes you to miss class. Do **not** get in touch asking “for the assignment” or a “rundown of what you missed.” My responsibilities as an instructor lie with the students who do come to class. Excused absences are accompanied by appropriate legal or medical documentation. Any unexcused absence will seriously undermine your success in this course.

## class preparation and participation

Mandatory.

You should come to class *with an agenda*. Put another way, you should come to each session *prepared to teach* and *prepared to engage*. Please see the Class Participation rubric (D2L) for more specifics.

Participation in a graduate seminar means careful, full preparation of the reading, frequent contributions to discussions, risk-taking in writing and thinking. You should arrive every Tuesday evening armed with observations, opinions, questions, and insights, ready to take an active part in the ongoing dialogue about the course materials. Class participation means that you work actively to stretch yourself intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually AND that you work actively to contribute to the class's overall movement and success. (This might mean, for example, moving from merely your position during class discussion to striving to promote dialogue between yourself and other seminarians). What you bring to share need not be written out but should refer to specific passages in the reading as the basis for formulating a broader discussion topic or questions. We will often start class by asking seminarians to share passages and questions. As such, **please bring to every class session BOTH specific passages and questions you feel are key as the basis for formulating broader discussion topics and producing insight about the text. You will be asked to produce them at the beginning of each class, often in conjunction with writing.**

Overall, think of our meetings as potluck conversations and activities punctuated by short in-class writing and informal lectures on the material.

Coming to class and saying you are “frustrated” with the reading and thus have nothing to contribute is intellectually lazy and irresponsible. These texts are demanding but rewarding; while there will be frustration with their complexity at times, this course understands that complexity as part of the challenge to which we aspire to rise during the semester.

For our collaborative endeavor to succeed, there are three preconditions that must be met: everyone must have done the reading and done it critically and carefully; everyone must be willing to take intellectual risks and be open to uncertainty; and everyone must be willing to engage respectfully.

## writing assignments

This course requires writing of different kinds. The latest research and thinking in Humanities pedagogy is that committed, regular writing is essential to meaningful exchange and insight in courses in literature, especially at advanced levels. As such, we will regularly be writing as well as sharing *in* writing in order to deepen engagement with these texts. Doing so will enable you to move forward from the experience of this course a better reader and writer, more confident and proficient in organizing and constructing strong interpretive arguments.

## individual project

The individual project should be developed in dialogue with me and have particular relevance for your field of study. For those on the literature/cultural studies track, for instance, an interpretive analysis of one of our plays that draws upon research (archival or scholarly) is appropriate. For secondary-education teachers students, a unit plan on, say, one of Wilson's plays is appropriate. For those on the creative writing track, I am open to other ideas as well and strongly encourage you to touch base with me about your thoughts and questions **well before** the short project proposal is due with your midterm essay.

## group project

Your final in this course will be a **group project and presentation**. We will discuss the parameters as we get closer to the conclusion of the term.

### late assignments

These are no fun for me to keep track of and only put you further behind. For each day beyond the scheduled due date, late midterm essays and individual projects will be penalized a third of a letter grade. **After a week, I will no longer accept them, and the grade becomes a "0."** In-class writing (including seed papers) **cannot be made up** since their primary purpose is for discussion. Again, if you become ill or the victim of emergency circumstances, please email me as soon as possible and stay in touch.

### cell phone and computer use

You may bring your computer to class with you, assuming that you use it in a scholarly and responsible fashion. This means that you will only have applications and windows related to the current discussion open. **You may not check** social media (including Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat), surf the web, send texts or Tweets, play games, or otherwise distract yourself and those around you from the class conversation with your computer. You are likewise expected to use cell phones in a responsible manner: **turn them off when you come in to class**. If you have an emergency for which you must be available, you must discuss it with me beforehand and keep your phone on vibrate. **Under no conditions are you allowed to** text message, take pictures or video (illegal in class), play games, or use the phone in any other manner during class. The nature of our scholarly endeavor together necessitates mutual respect and dedicated attention during the too short time we have to discuss these texts. Violating any of these policies will result in your participation grade being lowered by a full letter grade for each violation.

### academic integrity

Any paper with your name on it signifies that you are the author—that the wording and major ideas are yours, with exceptions indicated by either quotation marks and/or citations. Plagiarism is the unacknowledged use (appropriation and/or imitation) of others' materials (words and ideas). Evidence of plagiarism will result in one or more of the following: a failing grade for the assignment, an F in the course, and a report filed with the Student Standards Office.

### special needs and situations

If you have a *documented* disability and wish to receive academic accommodations, please meet with me as soon as possible.

### tech support

If you need assistance with D2L, call D2L Support toll free at 1-877-325-7778. Support is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Email and Chat options are also available on the "My Home" page after logging in to D2L. Other D2L resources including a D2L Orientation course for students are available on the same page. For technical questions regarding other software, hardware, network issues, EIU NetID/password, or Panthermail, contact the ITS Helpdesk at 217-581-4357 during regular business hours or submit a help ticket at <https://techsupport.eiu.edu/>. If you have a question regarding course content, contact your instructor.

# ENG 5061: African-American History Play

Dr. Chris Wixson

## course calendar

\*\*Because this schedule can and probably will change, it is imperative that you have access to it at each class meeting so as to make the appropriate revisions.

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|----------|----|--|
| January  | 9  | Parks' "Possession" (D2L) / Parks' biography (D2L)   |
|          | 16 | Parks' "An Equation for Black People Onstage" (D2L)<br>The "Negro" Character (excerpt) (D2L)<br>Parks' "new black math" (D2L)  |
|          | 23 | In-class screening of Spike Lee's <i>Bamboozled</i> (selected clips)<br>"The Art of Dramatic Composition: A Prologue" to <i>An Octoroon</i> ,<br>by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins (D2L) |
|          | 30 | Coates' <i>Between The World and Me</i> pp. 5-30 (D2L)   |
| February | 6  | <i>Father</i> Part One / <b>Seed Paper #1 Due</b>  |
|          | 13 | <i>Father</i> Part Two / <b>Seed Paper #2 Due</b>  |
|          | 20 | <i>Father</i> Part Three   |
|          | 27 | Screening of Ford's <i>Strong Island</i><br><b>Midterm and Individual Project Proposal Due</b>   |
| March    | 6  | MANDATORY CONFERENCES  |

### HAPPY SPRING BREAK!

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|----|--|
| 20 | Screening of "The Ground On Which I Stand"<br>Wilson's <i>Joe Turner's Come and Gone</i> (D2L) / Act One |
| 27 | Wilson's <i>Joe Turner's Come and Gone</i> (D2L) / Act Two<br><b>Seed Paper #3 Due</b>                   |

- April
- 3 Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* / Act One / **Seed Paper #4 Due**
  - 10 Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* / Act Two  
Individual Project Due  
Toni Morrison's "Mourning for Whiteness" / Group Project Assignment
  - 17 Group Meetings
  - 24 Group Meetings

\*\*Final exam session: Tuesday, May 1st, 7:30-9:30 PM