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ENG 4750-001: Studies in African American Literature: Race, Class and Mass Incarceration

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Studies in African American Literature:
Race, Class and Mass Incarceration
English 4750–Spring, 2014
5:00-6:15 TR Coleman 3150

Instructor: Tim Engles (tdengles@eiu.edu)
Office: Coleman 3831
Office hours: 10:45 – 11:45 p.m. TR, and by appointment

Required texts:

William Attaway, *Blood on the Forge* (1941)
Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945)
Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973)

COURSE POLICIES AND PROCEDURES
(read the following carefully; these words constitute our contract, and I will request your written agreement to them)

As African American writers often emphasize, American society has continually found ways to restrain black opportunity and agency, from the early limitation of slavery to people of African descent, to the institution of “slavery by another name” during the Jim Crow era, to the curtailment of voting rights and the targeted mass incarceration of black men during the current “New Jim Crow” era. And yet, African Americans have long been told the lie that the American Dream of unfettered social mobility has been as readily available to them as anyone else. We will study literature and scholarship that exposes and resists such white supremacist constraints, always with the understanding that the myths about race are inevitably tied to the realities of social class.

We will conduct our course as an inquiring conversation on these matters, with your active participation central to our work. Because we are a relatively small course, the success of our conversations will depend more heavily than usual on everyone’s participation. It is therefore crucial that you keep up with the reading, and that you do so with careful attention.

MORE ABOUT READING: Since one skill you will be developing in this class is the art of textual analysis, you must give the readings more than a quick skimming over. Instead of wolfing them down right before class, set aside enough time to read carefully—take notes as you read, then decide for yourself, before coming to class, what each author is trying to describe and bring to light. Also, to ensure that your final grade reflects your reading effort, I will
occasionally give “pop” quizzes at the beginning of class on required readings. These quizzes will be unannounced and they cannot be made up. I recognize that some students must be absent at times; accordingly, when I compile your quiz grades at the end of the semester into an average score, I will drop the lowest one—if you miss a quiz, that will be your one dropped quiz. If you don’t miss any quizzes, I will still drop your lowest score from your quiz average.

GRADES: Each assignment will be graded on a 100-point scale (90-100 = A, etc.), and your final course grade will be determined in the following way:

- 1st formal essay (6-8 pages) 20%
- 2nd formal essay (6-8 pages) 25%
- In-class presentation 15%
- Final take-home exam 25%
- Participation/quizzes/attendance 15%

MISSED QUizzes AND LATE PAPERS: 1) Because the answers to unannounced quizzes come up in class after quizzes are taken, they cannot be made up (even if you come to class late). These quizzes are one way to reward those who attend class regularly and on time. 2) Papers are due at the beginning of class on the due date whether the student is in class or not. Late papers will be penalized fifteen points each day they are late. You may turn in the two essays before their due dates if you know you must miss class that day.

E-MAIL ACTIVITY: Enrollment in this class requires an e-mail account, and you must check it frequently, preferably every day, for messages pertaining to the course. You already have a free EIU e-mail account, which I would prefer that you use. You can use a commercial account for this course, but be aware that free web-based accounts (such as Hotmail or Yahoo) sometimes cause problems with listserv subscriptions. Our class discussions may carry over onto the e-mail listserv, and I will occasionally send messages to the entire class. E-mail is also the quickest way to reach me if I am not in my office; I welcome any questions and comments.

Send an e-mail message by Friday, January 17 at 3:00 p.m. to Dr. Engles (tdengles@eiu.edu) to confirm your email address. Also, 1) explain which course you are in (English 4750); 2) describe yourself in whatever ways you choose, including your career aspirations; 3) write a statement to the effect that you have read and agree with the course policies and procedures; and 4) as with all e-mail messages, be sure that you “sign” it by adding your name at the end.

CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT: The best way to demonstrate that you are an active, engaged, and interested reader is by contributing regularly to class discussions, and by paying close, respectful attention to what everyone else has to say. I do not plan to lecture in this class; I want us to contribute together to a positive, challenging, interesting learning environment. Also, be aware that many sensitive issues tend to arise within a course on multicultural material, so we must respect the opinions of others; try to respond to ideas, rather than to the person stating them. In my opinion, it’s okay for discussions to become “heated,” as long as we respect each other as people. If you have questions, no matter how simple or complicated, go ahead and ask me, either in class or via e-mail—chances are that other students have the same question.
ATTENDANCE POLICY: The rule regarding attendance is: be here. I will take attendance, and I expect you to attend class every day, on time, and prepared to discuss the material listed for that day on the “daily schedule.” Missing class frequently will lower your final grade as well as your grade on the reading quizzes. Three absences during the semester are okay; for each additional absence after three, your final grade will go down a full letter grade.

In addition, note that coming to class “prepared” means coming to class with that day’s assigned reading—anyone who does not have the day’s assigned reading with them may be considered absent. Also, you are responsible for all assignments, whether you attend class or not. Get the telephone number of one or two other students in class, or get a hold of me, so you can find out about any missed assignments before you come to class.

REGARDING TARDINESS: This is a small class, so late arrivals are disruptive—if for some bizarre reason you wish to get on my bad side, you can easily do so by developing the habit of arriving late for class. Please show respect for everyone in our group by consistently arriving on time. However, if on some day you must be late, do still come to class; you can explain to me afterward why you came late.

ACADEMIC HONESTY: Keep in mind, of course, the English Department’s policy 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 original work’ (Random House Dictionary of the English Language)—has the right and the responsibility to impose upon the guilty student an appropriate penalty, up to and including immediate assignment of a grade of F for the course, and to report the incident to the Judicial Affairs Office.”