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ENG 4750-001: Studies in African American Literature-Bluesology

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English 4750.001: Studies in African American Literature—Bluesology: The Blues and its Literary Legacy

Course description: Ralph Ellison describes the blues as “an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.” This course explores, through both musical and literary texts, how that vernacular expression blossoms into literary achievement. We’ll listen to blues artists from the Mississippi delta to urban Chicago, and we’ll read a variety of literary selections from Frederick Douglass and Du Bois to Amiri Baraka and Sonia Sanchez.

Course format: We’ll work as much as possible in seminar discussion: reading, watching video, listening to songs and to each other’s research and reflection. Opportunity exists for independent research, both bibliographical and analytical. Indeed, whenever you find information useful to our common pursuit—say, a blues website, a journal, or an article in one, an upcoming performance or a news report—then share it with us all. We’ll define ourselves and our work, insofar as possible, as we discover where heart and head are keeping time together to chase the blues away with the blues.

Course texts:
Amiri Baraka [LeRoi Jones], Blues People, 1963

Course requirements: Discussion (20%), short essay [3-4 pages] (15%), midterm essay examination (15%), long essay [10-12 pages] (25%) and final essay examination (25%), or grading by contract (further discussion to follow) in some combination of writing and proposed projects.

Prerequisite and Electronic Writing Portfolio Submissions: Students must have completed English 1002G or its equivalent before enrolling in ENG 4750, a “writing intensive” course. Sophomores, juniors and seniors may elect to submit an essay from ENG 4750 to their Electronic Writing Portfolio (EWP). This means that you may need to submit an essay from this course for your EWP. If so, you must inform me no later than the last week of class—EWP submissions are not accepted after completion of the course, and you are responsible for consulting the web site of Center for Academic Support and Achievement for instructions. See http://www.eiu/~assess for more information.
Please note: The study of African American literature is the study of American literature and culture from the point of view of African American writers giving voice to African American experiences in the context of American culture and history in light of the enslavement, struggles and achievements of those Americans of African descent. Our discussions must be frank and honest—if we are to make use of this literature beyond class or race privilege and beyond a checkbox of "the cultural diversity" or "multicultural education" requirements. To that end, my hope is for vigorous debate and discussion but always in the spirit of respect, discovery, equality and intellectual growth for us all. Such responsibility begins in hearing and reading the texts. Such work means, fundamentally, becoming a different person in that growth. Such responsible growth suggests commitment to each other.

General Policies:

Grading Standards: I shall follow the EIU English Department Guidelines, distributed in class. In all cases, I shall use a plus and minus system to distinguish, say, a high B from a low one.

Attendance: I do take roll, and I evaluate attendance only indirectly in the context of your participation in the course.

Conferences: These are at your request unless I ask to see you. Please ask for help as soon as you feel you need it; please don't wait until the last couple of weeks of class.

Submission of work: Essays should be typed, double-spaced, on one side of the paper only, titled and indicate the following: name, date, and course and section number. Exercises and quizzes must be legible.

Late Essays: For each day that the essay is late, the letter grade will fall by one full grade: an A essay due on Thursday will be an F by the next Thursday. If there are particular difficulties, please see me.

Plagiarism: The English Department Policy

Any teacher who discovers an act of plagiarism—"The appropriation or imitation of the language, ideas, and/or thoughts of another author, and the representation of them as one's own 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.

If I discover an act of plagiarism, I shall exercise the right to the fullest extent possible. (See http://www.elu/~judicial/code.html for more information.)

Information for students with disabilities:

If you have a documented disability and wish to receive academic accommodations, please contact the Coordinator of the Office of Student Disability Services (581-6583) as soon as possible.
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Course Syllabus (tentative and subject to revisions):

January

T 8: Course introduction: Video: Feel Like Going Home (Sony DVD 55804, 2003)

T 15: (continued)—and discussion; Robert Santelli’s “A Century of the Blues” (12-59) and “Feel Like Going Home” (60-97) in ... the Blues: A Musical Journey


Background readings: The Norton Anthology of African American Literature: “Introduction: Talking Books” and “The Vernacular Tradition” (1-8); peruse the lyrics and “oral texts” from 8-148, especially 8-77, for an overview of what lyrics are readily available to you in print.

Read, or re-read, the following, especially if you have never encountered these texts: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, especially chapter two (400-401) in the last three paragraphs; The Souls of Black Folk, chapter 14 (758-765) and “Criteria of Negro Art” (777-784).

In addition, the brief introductory sections in ... African American Literature offer a rather succinct but useful overview of African American historical and literary developments—“The Literature of...” sections: 151-162; 541-554; 953-962; 1355-1368; 1831-1850; 2127-2139. Please have these required readings completed by February 19; I’ll assume you’ve done so by then, and the material from that point on will belong to your repertoire.

February

T 12: Wake Up Dead Man (1-47, including the photographs; 305-306); specific songs in class (please bring the book) from Wake Up Dead Man (Rounder CD 2013)—and discussion; Zora Neale Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression” from The Norton Anthology of African American Literature (1041-1053)—and discussion
Evaluation contract due

T 19: The Norton Anthology of African American Literature: The poetry of Sterling Brown (1248-1265) and Video: Blues Story (Sony/Shout! Factory DVD 31226, 2003)—and discussion

T 26: ... Norton Anthology...: The poetry of Langston Hughes (1288-1309) and video: The Blues According to Lightin’ Hopkins

March
T 5: Murray, Stomping the Blues (read in its entirety—skim chapters 8-10—but look at photographs throughout the text) Short essay due

Spring Break
T 19: Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me

T 26: Blues People (chapters 1-8, 10-12); Ralph Ellison, “Blues People” from Shadow and Act, NY: Random House, 1964: 247-257. (handout)

April
T 2: ... Norton Anthology...: The poetry of Etheridge Knight (1908-1911)
... Norton Anthology...: The poetry of Amiri Baraka (1937-1963)

T 9: ... Norton Anthology...: The poetry of Sonia Sanchez (1963-1968)
... Norton Anthology...: The poetry of Michael Harper (2070-2075)

T 16: Oral presentations (as necessary)
Annotated bibliography [required of graduate students] due

T 23: Oral presentations (as necessary)
Long essay due or Reading journal due

Final Examination: None is scheduled at this point; however, should the time period be necessary for the presentation of your work, we will use the slotted time: Tuesday, April 30, 7:30-9:30