

## ENGLISH 433G: AFRICAN AMERICAN NOVELS OF THE “NADIR”

Time: Tuesday and Thursday 12:30–1:45 p.m.  
 Classroom: Griffin 202  
 Office Hours: Wednesday 11:00 a.m.–3:00 p.m.  
 Office: Griffin 250

Instructor: Professor Maria Seger  
 Email: maria.seger@louisiana.edu  
 Phone: 337-482-6970  
 Mailbox: Griffin 221

### COURSE OVERVIEW

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This seminar will survey African American novels of the period that scholars have often called the “nadir” of African American history, including novels by such authors as Charles W. Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Sutton E. Griggs, Frances E. W. Harper, Pauline Hopkins, and James Weldon Johnson. This period following the failure of Reconstruction—from roughly 1890 through 1920—witnessed the rise of Jim Crow laws, the Ku Klux Klan, the Great Migration, and spectacle lynching and the expansion of minstrelsy and scientific racism. But African American novels responded in kind, expressing resistance to structural and individual forms of oppression through genres such as sentimentalism, realism, romance, utopianism, historical fiction, and speculative and science fiction. Through an exploration of the ways in which African American novels represent the past, present, and future of black experience at the nadir, this seminar will introduce a variety of theoretical approaches to the field of African American literary studies, including methods from American cultural studies, gender studies, and critical race and ethnic studies.

### REQUIRED TEXTS

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Chesnutt, Charles W. *The House behind the Cedars*. 1900. Mineola: Dover, 2007. Print. ISBN: 978-0-486-46144-1.

Dunbar, Paul Laurence. *The Sport of the Gods and Other Essential Writings*. 1902. Ed. Shelley Fisher Fishkin and David Bradley. New York: Modern Library, 2005. Print. ISBN: 0-8129-7279-1.

Griggs, Sutton E. *Imperium in Imperio*. 1899. New York: Modern Library, 2003. Print. ISBN: 978-0-8129-7160-6.

Harper, Frances E. W. *Iola Leroy, or, Shadows Uplifted*. 1892. Mineola: Dover, 2010. Print. ISBN: 978-0-486-47901-9.

Hopkins, Pauline. *Of One Blood: or, the Hidden Self*. 1902–03. New York: Washington Square, 2004. Print. 978-0-7434-6769-8.

Johnson, James Weldon. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. 1912. Ed. Philip Smith. Mineola: Dover, 1995. Print. 978-0-486-28512-2.

### SOURCES AVAILABLE ON MOODLE

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Please bring a hard copy of these sources to class.

Bruce, Dickson D., Jr. Prologue. *Black American Writing from the Nadir: The Evolution of a Literary*

- Tradition, 1877–1915*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1989. 1–10. Print.
- Connolly, N. D. B. “This, Our Second Nadir.” *Boston Review*. Boston Review, 21 Feb. 2018. Web.
- Du Bois, W. E. Burghardt. “Back Toward Slavery.” *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880*. New York: Harcourt, 1935. 670–710. Print.
- English, Daylanne K. “‘Temporal Damage’: Pragmatism and *Plessy* in African American Novels, 1896–1902.” *Each Hour Redeem: Time and Justice in African American Literature*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2013. 47–79. Print.
- Goldsby, Jacqueline. “A Sign of the Times: Lynching and Its Cultural Logic.” *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006. 12–42. Print.
- Salvant, Shawn. “Race, Blood, and the American Racial Imagination.” Introduction. *Blood Work: Imagining Race in American Literature, 1890–1940*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2015. 1–38. Print.
- Sheffer, Jolie A. Introduction. *The Romance of Race: Incest, Miscegenation, and Multiculturalism in the United States, 1880–1930*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2013. 1–26. Print.
- Williams, Andréa N. “Contending Classes, Dividing Lines.” Introduction. *Dividing Lines: Class Anxiety and Postbellum Black Fiction*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2013. 1–24. Print.

## **COURSE COMPONENTS**

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*Presentations*: You’ll complete two presentations over the course of the term aimed at developing your confidence in speaking about your academic work.

*Cultural Artifact Presentation*: During one class this term, you’ll present a cultural artifact that provides context for the primary text reading we have completed for that day. You may choose any related cultural object or text, such as a song, visual art, newspaper or magazine article, etc. You may wish to distribute a handout or use the classroom’s multimedia equipment, and you should plan to speak and field questions for roughly ten minutes. A sign-up sheet will be circulated on the first day of class.

*Research Essay Presentation*: During our final class, you’ll briefly present the argument of your research essay to the class. You may wish to distribute a handout or use the classroom’s multimedia equipment, and you should plan to speak and field questions for roughly five minutes.

*Writing*: You’ll undertake a variety of writing assignments over the course of the term aimed at developing your skills in academic writing. Please use Modern Language Association (MLA) guidelines and submit written assignments in hard copy.

*Close Readings*: You’ll complete two short writing assignments of 500 to 750 words aimed at

developing your skills of close reading primary texts and turning observations into arguments. You may close read a passage or two from any primary text on the syllabus in each assignment.

*Abstract and Annotated Bibliography:* You'll write a short abstract of roughly 250 words that identifies your research question (and potentially your tentative answer to that question), the critical conversation to which you're responding, and the stakes/implications of your project. You'll also compile an annotated bibliography with eight source entries of roughly 150 words each. For each source, list a complete citation as well as a summary of the source's argument, how its argument relates to your other sources' arguments, and how you plan to position your argument in response.

*Research Essay:* You'll submit a roughly 3,000- to 3,500-word research article that makes a claim about an African American novel of the "nadir" and responds to a critical conversation within African American literary studies. Your previous assignments may serve as a foundation for this essay.

### GRADE BREAKDOWN

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Cultural Artifact Presentation	15%
Close Readings	20%
Abstract and Annotated Bibliography	20%
Research Essay Presentation	15%
Research Essay	30%

### GRADE SCALE

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- A: 100%–90%
- B: 89%–80%
- C: 79%–70%
- D: 69%–60%
- F: 59%–0%

While individual assignments may receive half letter grades (pluses or minuses), final grades are calculated according to the above scale.

### COURSE POLICIES

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*Cancellations/Weather:* Please check your email regularly in case of class cancellations. If class is canceled, I will send alternate directions via email.

*Disabilities:* I am committed to ensuring that students have access to the conditions that they need to succeed in my course. If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, please contact me as well as the Office of Disability Services as soon as possible. More information can be found at <https://disability.louisiana.edu>.

*Late Assignments:* I don't generally accept late assignments. That being said, life happens. If you have

a situation, please contact me as soon as possible so that we can make alternate arrangements.

*Participation/Class Behavior.* This course will be conducted in a seminar style, meaning that participation from each student will be vital to everyone’s success. Class discussion is a collective enterprise from which we all grow and from which we individually benefit on class assignments, so I expect that you will strive to be on time to and present in class, meaningfully contribute to our communal inquires and discussions, comport yourself with appropriate behavior and mutual respect for your classmates, and come to class with the assigned materials and having done the assigned reading. If electronic devices are fundamental to your learning process, please feel free to use them in seminar. That being said, please be mindful of your ability to distract yourself and others when using electronics for other purposes during class time.

*Plagiarism.* Because academic writing purports to create new knowledge, plagiarism is considered a serious ethical violation. For this reason, plagiarism of any kind will result in, at a minimum, a failing grade for the assignment, and, at a maximum, dismissal from the University. The University’s official definition of plagiarism is as follows: “Plagiarism is a specific type of cheating. It occurs when a student claims originality for the ideas or words of another person, when the student presents as a new and original idea or product anything which in fact is derived from an existing work, or when the student makes use of any work or production already created by someone else without giving credit to the source. In short, plagiarism is the use of unacknowledged materials in the preparation of assignments.” If you have any questions or concerns about plagiarism, please contact me.

*Writing Center.* The Writing Center employs tutors who can help students with their writing at any stage of the process—from brainstorming to polishing their final drafts. This service is free, and I recommend it for even the most confident writers. More information can be found at <http://english.louisiana.edu/about-us/publications-centers/writing-center>.

## COURSE SCHEDULE

DATE	READINGS	DEADLINES
Thursday 1/17	Syllabus, Connolly, “This, Our Second Nadir” (Moodle), Bruce, Prologue (Moodle), and Du Bois “Back Toward Slavery” (Moodle)	
Tuesday 1/22	Harper, <i>Iola Leroy</i> (9–64)	
Thursday 1/24	Harper, <i>Iola Leroy</i> (65–112)	
Tuesday 1/29	Harper, <i>Iola Leroy</i> (113–65)	
Thursday 1/31	Harper, <i>Iola Leroy</i> (166–219)	
Tuesday 2/5	English, ““Temporal Damage”” (Moodle)	
Thursday 2/7	Griggs, <i>Imperium in Imperio</i> (3–59)	Close Reading #1
Tuesday 2/12	Griggs, <i>Imperium in Imperio</i> (60–115)	
Thursday 2/14	Griggs, <i>Imperium in Imperio</i> (115–77)	
Tuesday 2/19	Sheffer, Introduction (Moodle)	
Thursday 2/21	Chesnutt, <i>The House behind the Cedars</i> (1–51)	
Tuesday 2/26	Chesnutt, <i>The House behind the Cedars</i> (52–100)	
Thursday 2/28	Chesnutt, <i>The House behind the Cedars</i> (101–48)	
Thursday 3/7	No class meeting	
Tuesday 3/12	Chesnutt, <i>The House behind the Cedars</i> (148–99)	Abstract and

		Annotated Bibliography
Thursday 3/14	Williams, "Contending Classes" (Moodle)	
Tuesday 3/19	Dunbar, <i>The Sport of the Gods</i> (321–62)	
Thursday 3/21	Dunbar, <i>The Sport of the Gods</i> (363–98)	
Tuesday 3/26	Dunbar, <i>The Sport of the Gods</i> (399–433)	
Thursday 3/28	Salvant, "Race, Blood, and the American Racial Imagination" (Moodle)	
Tuesday 4/2	Hopkins, <i>Of One Blood</i> (1–52)	
Thursday 4/4	Hopkins, <i>Of One Blood</i> (53–102)	Close Reading #2
Tuesday 4/9	Hopkins, <i>Of One Blood</i> (103–48)	
Thursday 4/11	Hopkins, <i>Of One Blood</i> (149–93)	
Tuesday 4/23	Goldsby, "A Sign of the Times" (Moodle)	
Thursday 4/25	Johnson, <i>The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man</i> (vii–51)	
Tuesday 4/30	Johnson, <i>The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man</i> (52–100)	
Thursday 5/2		Research Essay Presentation
Tuesday 5/7 by 8 p.m.		Research Essay