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Menu

Syllabus | Blackness & Utopia

As a continuation of my efforts at [Going Digital](#), I'm revising the syllabus for a course I taught a couple years ago in order to include it in the repository of pedagogical artifacts for *Digital Pedagogy in the Humanities*, an MLA-sponsored online resource currently in development. Let's see how this works out. This is a utopian remix of the course modified for the prospect of teaching online. I taught this as a Topics in African American Literature course at [Drexel University](#), in 2013.

BLACKNESS & UTOPIA | PROFESSOR CARRINGTON



COURSE DESCRIPTION

We will examine how black writers have articulated utopian visions, from Emancipation to the 20th century, and how they have intervened in the utopian traditions of American literature and culture, including anti-utopia, heterotopia, and dystopia. Novels, short stories, and film by African-American authors that portray utopian societies and movements, along with cultural criticism grounded in the study of those texts, form the basis for our work in this course. We will engage with the ways in which Black authors have envisioned a better world and how they have articulated distinct agendas for self-determination.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. We will use readings, discussions, and assessments to refine the two principal concepts that frame the course: Blackness and Utopia—but not necessarily to establish a fixed definition for either term.
2. Students should expect their own written work and contributions to class discussion to communicate a nuanced appreciation for the form and content of the readings as well as the capacity to ask informed questions about them.
3. Students will develop an awareness of how cultural criticism addresses the concept of utopia and how the concerns of this field pertain to African-American literature.
4. By cultivating familiarity with the primary and secondary texts, students will progress toward a substantive, multifaceted understanding of the interests of Black writers and readers.
5. Supplementary research into relevant primary and secondary sources will provide students with a broader understanding of the fields of knowledge that inform the topics of our course.
6. Assessments in the course will encourage students to a) practice applying the categories of analysis that are prioritized in literary criticism, b) express themselves within the scope of an academic argument.
7. Students will share responsibility with the professor for maintaining class discussion as a space for reflection that is grounded by studied interpretations of the readings.

REQUIRED TEXTS

- Sutton Griggs, *Imperium in Imperio*. Electronic edition [via HathiTrust](#).
- George Schuyler, *Black Empire*. Northeastern, 1993. Print or ebook.
- Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*. Warner, 1993. Print or ebook.

ADDITIONAL ASSIGNED MATERIAL

- [David Walker. "Appeal...to the Colored Citizens of the World"-PDF](#)
- Samuel Delany, "We, in Some Strange Power's Employ, Move on a Rigorous Line," from *Aye, and Gomorrah*
- Octavia Butler, "The Book of Martha," from Marleen Barr, ed. *Afro-Future Females*
- Julie Dash, dir. *Daughters of the Dust* (film: secure, licensed streaming)
- Kahiu Wanuri, dir. *Pumzi* (film: secure, licensed streaming)/[vimeo](#)
- Supplementary readings/materials specified below will be available via the Content Management System (Drupal, Moodle, WordPress, BBLearn, etc.)

ASSESSMENT AND GRADING

- Class participation (attendance, in-class assignments, discussion): 20%
- Formative assessment 1 (emphasis on comprehension, short turnaround time): 15%

- Formative assessment 2 (emphasis on interpretation, pre-assigned secondary sources): 15%
- Responses to films (2): 20%
- Summative assessment (emphasis on interpretation, self-directed research): 30%

PLAN OF STUDY

This schedule is modified from a ten-week quarter calendar with two to three in-class meetings per week. The changes accommodate a course of equal or longer duration, in vivo or online with videoconferencing and live chat collaboration tools.

Unit I: Orientation

- Overview of the course and texts, review the Learning Objectives—live or by video
- “Utopias and Utopianism,” from Encyclopedia of American Studies
- Slave Revolts, Marronage, and Colonization (readings TBD, e.g. *Africa and the Americas*, PBS documentaries, *The Invention of the White Race*),
- Vincent Brown: Slave Revolt in Jamaica
- Maroonage: World Heritage Sites
- In-class discussion: David Walker’s *Appeal*

Unit II: Race Travel

- Maria Fabi, “Race Travel...Early 20th Century African American Utopian Fiction”
- Sutton Griggs, *Imperium in Imperio*: Introduction by Cornel West, Chronology of Sutton Griggs, chapters: “To the Public” and “Belton Finds a Friend”
- In-class discussion of introductory chapters
- Recommended reading order: Chapters VI through IX, Chapters X through XIII, Chapters XIV through Conclusion
- First formative assessment due following discussion of Conclusion

Unit III: Satire and Anti-Utopia

- Sharon DeGraw, “Schuyler,” from *The Subject of Race in American Science Fiction* + Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia-YouTube video
- George Schuyler, *Black Empire*, part 1.0
- In-class discussion of part 1.0 vs. part 2.1
- George Schuyler, *Black Empire*, part 2.2

- Second formative assessment incorporating select secondary sources (e.g. *Encyclopedia of African American Culture & History*, *Encyclopedia of American Studies*, *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*)

Unit IV: Space/place, realism, speculation

- Film 1. *Daughters of the Dust*
- Response due on *Daughters of the Dust* + supplementary reading
- Introduction to the work of Samuel Delany + “We, in Some Strange Power’s Employ”
- In-class collaborative assignment: Infrastructure/technology and utopia + [rural electrification-YouTube video](#)

Unit V: The Critical Dystopia

- Film 2. *Pumzi* + response
- Tom Moylan, “Octavia Butler’s Parables,” from *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*
- Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*
- Workshop on final paper research

UNIT VI: Against Race/Against Utopia?

- [Paul Gilroy: Race and the Right to Be Human-YouTube video](#)
- Paul Gilroy, *Against Race*
- Tommie Shelby and Paul Gilroy, “Cosmopolitanism, Blackness, and Utopia”
- Final reading assignment/discussion: Octavia Butler, “The Book of Martha”
- Final paper: incorporating [Utopia and the American Dream](#)



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