UNIVERSITY STUDIES COURSE PROPOSAL FORM: EXISTING COURSES

Course Number and Title: English 4450: The African American Novel
Effective Date: Spring 07 if possible; if not, Fall 07  Credit Hours: 3

Request prepared by
Typed Name: Peter West  Date: Oct. 27, 2006
Title: Assistant Professor  Department: English
Telephone: 766-6459  Signature: Peter West (pp for PW)

APPROVE FOR UNIVERSITY STUDIES (Mark each that apply, but no more than two) Attach criteria review sheets for each category requested.

Cultural Context:
___ C--Integrated Cultural Context
___ CH--Humanities
___ CS--Social Sciences
___ CA--Arts
___ D--Diversity in the United States
___ G--Global Awareness
___ I--Intellectual Community
___ L--Information Literacy
___ O--Oral Communication
___ P--Physical Activity and Health

Quantitative Reasoning
___ QA--Quantitative Reasoning 1
___ QB--Quantitative Reasoning 2

Natural Sciences
___ S--Integrated Science
___ SB--Biological Science
___ SP--Physical Science
___ SE--Earth Science
___ V--U.S. and Wyoming Constitutions

Writing
___ WA--Writing 1
___ WB--Writing 2
___ WC--Writing 3

If this course is a 1000 or 2000 level, has it gone through the articulation process with the Wyoming community colleges? If not, please contact Janet Timmerman at 766-3152.

PLEASE ATTACH A DETAILED SYLLABUS FOR THE PROPOSED COURSE.

Peter, Sarah  Oct. 27, 06
Department Head (for Susan Frye)

Approved for USP

University Studies Committee  Date
University Studies Program
Criteria Review Sheet

Cultural Diversity in the United States (D)
In order to function in a diverse U. S. culture, students should gain a recognition and understanding of the continuing importance of elements of identity even as they come to be aware of how historically contingent and unstable these elements are. Knowledge of influences such as race, class, ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion, and age will offer students a variety of means to understand U. S. behaviors, institutions, values, and beliefs. Cultural Diversity in the U.S. courses should address the following:

1. An appreciation of how the diversity of the constituent cultural traditions of the United States have shaped and continue to shape identity and national experience.
2. An understanding of how diverse values, attitudes, worldviews, and aesthetic traditions in the United States are shaped by selected viewpoints emanating from elements such as race, class, ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion, and age.
3. An ability to critically examine personal values, attitudes, and cultural identities.

Appropriate courses will focus on themes or issues in United States history, society, or culture, and on theoretical or analytical issues relevant to understanding race, culture, ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion, and age in U. S. society. D courses should help students to understand the relationship between contemporary and historical experience.

Course Prefix and Number: English 4450  Credit Hours: 3

Course Title: The African American Novel

Please attach a detailed course syllabus that includes the objectives or outcomes for the course and the means to assess the extent that students reach them.

List any prerequisites:

1. Using information from the syllabus, please describe how this course meets the learning goals (outcomes) and criteria for the D category by answering the following questions:

   A. Describe how students will gain an appreciation of how the diversity of the constituent cultural traditions of the United States have shaped and continue to shape identity and national experience.

English 4450 carefully examines the development of the African American novel from 1853, when William Wells Brown published the first novel written by a black American, to the present day. From the first appearance of Brown’s novel, the African American
novelistic tradition has been defined by its confrontation of the conventional understanding of U.S. national history as a story of liberty and consensus. Brown’s *Clotel* was based upon the contemporaneous rumor that Thomas Jefferson had fathered children with one of his female slaves. In implicating the writer of the Declaration of Independence in the question of slavery, of course, Brown was attacking the very foundation of American identity-making. At the same time, Brown’s use of the Sally Hemings rumor (long before the advent of DNA testing) reminds us of the relevance of the novel—and the African American novel more generally—to our own cultural moment. The novels covered in this class critique the ongoing intention of America by exposing the ideological dimensions of national myth-making and by resisting the roles prescribed by white America for the black literary artist. Not a class period goes by without connecting such a dialogue to our own world—to hip-hop, to politics, to jazz, to the ongoing attempt by our own mass culture to define blackness according to its own terms. In other words, the class at once introduces students to a vital literary tradition in America and seeks to remind them that the very category of “African American” novel privileges the logic of race that continues to determine the parameters of American social life today.

B. How will students develop an understanding of how diverse values, attitudes, worldviews, and aesthetic traditions in the United States are shaped by selected viewpoints emanating from elements such as race, class, ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion, and age?

As a class focused on the literary work of a group of writers defined by their race, we begin the course by asking what it means to label a work “African American.” In other words, as we build our own story of a particular literary tradition, we also seek to understand the implications of racial taxonomizing as a way of organizing our world. Of course, as part of this conversation we trace the emergence of a distinct African-American literary aesthetic (in the work of Zora Neale Hurston, for example). But we also interrogate how such innovations seek to acknowledge racial identity itself as a mode of meaning often imposed upon the black artist.

C. How will students develop the ability to critically examine personal values, attitudes, and cultural identities?

Because many of the students at the University of Wyoming have primarily engaged with African American culture through the mass-mediated images of television, film, and music, we spend a great deal of time considering how our sense of “blackness” is shaped by the world we live in. One way the class links this to our subject matter is to consider how each of our writers responded to a certain set of assumptions about blackness. How for example, did a slave writer like William Wells Brown subvert the expectations imposed on him by the abolitionist culture to whom he was speaking? We look especially carefully at moments where particular characters seem to deny the importance of race to their own identities—in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, for example, or in Charles
Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition*—in order to move beyond an understanding of racial consciousness as entirely affirmative. Indeed, we might consider such a moment alongside Dave Chappelle’s “Racial Pixie” skit, in which Chappelle imagines how the stereotypical black man might behave in a certain situation, and then carefully rejects such an option. In the language of contemporary black novelist Percival Everett, such a model of black identity is best understood as an act of ongoing “erasure” of the popular conception of blackness. Such invocations of contemporary popular culture ask students to understand how their own status as consumer and reader participates in the process of racial myth-making. And, of course, this lesson speaks to all types of identity formation—so that students leave the course wary of defining any one human by the categories that mass culture relies on.

D. How will this course focus on themes or issues in United States history, society, or culture, and on theoretical or analytical issues relevant to understanding race, culture, ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion, and age in U. S. society?

As indicated above, one of the constant subjects of this course is the process of writing history. By exposing history as a function and a source of power, these authors use literary expression to subvert the authority of those stories America loves to tell itself. More importantly, perhaps, we consider the relevance of historical context for every text that we read. When we consider the domestic and sentimental ideology of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, we carefully historicize Harper’s novel in the context of the post-Reconstruction South, where the question of black integration was a subject of ongoing debate. By understanding Harper’s conservative-seeming project in this context, we understand how her privileging of white middle-class ideals spoke to the moment in which she was writing. As many students readily point out, the novel also speaks in interesting and subtle ways to a late-twentieth-century phenomenon like “The Cosby Show,” where prominent black upper-middle-class characters appeared on television for the first time. Using history to read literature is only valuable when the class is willing to make connections between the text’s relationship to its original context and its relationship to our world today.

2. Explain how the assessment method(s) used for this course demonstrate student achievement of the learning outcomes for the D category. Explain how this assessment might provide information that can be used to improve accomplishment of desired learning outcomes.

Every assignment students are asked to turn in addresses in some way the kinds of issues discussed in the above responses. Students can only fully comprehend the complexity of identity as a discourse rooted in the political realities of our country by grappling with such questions on their own. It is for this reason that the course relies on two different kinds of writing assignments: journal entries and formal essays. In the journal writing, students can wrestle with some of the philosophical, political, and aesthetic questions raised in our readings (and in classroom discussions) without the added pressure and
distraction of having to posit and defend a formal argument. At the same time, the essays afford them the equally valuable opportunity to translate their reactions and opinions into the more formal language of a critical essay. While a formal assignment handout will suggest topics to cover in an essay, each student will be asked to come up with her/his specific thesis about a text—so that we are not merely rehashing the points raised in our discussions and lectures. It is counterproductive to encourage students to understand the nuances of how each of our writers engages in their own way with questions of identity and history, and then merely ask them to restate on paper what we cover in class. The two-pronged approach to writing in 4450 allows the professor to identify any potential problem a students is having as either a question of grasping the material and questions raised in class or a problem with essay writing as a method for articulating such an understanding. Similarly, in the final exam students have the important opportunity to make new connections among our texts, and between our readings and the larger social world in which they live. Essay questions on the final exam might ask students to take a contemporary example of how African-American artistic culture and connect it to a handful of novels we've read this semester. Or they might be asked to talk about the significance of our readings without ever using the words "race," "identity," or "black"—so that they can understand the various ways our authors are meaningful outside of the question of racial identity.

3. What other factors should the committee consider?

The very diversity of the works we cover helps students understand that a "tradition" is defined not by conformity, but by heterogeneity. While the goals of the "D" requirement are important and admirable, these classes carry an implicit burden of somehow "representing" to each student not only the population(s) under consideration but the very idea of cultural diversity—a problematic, if not impossible, task. What English 4450 seeks to achieve is a careful introduction to a rich literary tradition, but one that continuously problematizes the idea of approaching culture through the lens and logic of representative thinking. Each of our writers is defined by an attention to race, but each also has a great deal to say outside the paradigm of racial identity. At a time when many Americans seek to define "America" by a certain model of political consensus, courses such as this one demand that we understand the real value of diversity—not as a sprinkling of texts that ultimately agree with our most deeply-held values, but as a profound challenge to our very attempts at keeping the idea of "America" whole. To disrupt the homogeneity of our national identity is a project of significant consequence, for only by constantly reminding ourselves of the potential instability of any communal identity do we perform the real work of intellectual and moral reflection.
Course Info:
MWF 12:00-12:50
EN 3102
Fall 2006

My Info:
Hoyt 423
766-6459
pwest@uwyo.edu

We begin the semester by considering the place of fiction in the debates over race and slavery in antebellum America; we will conclude by seeking to understand how contemporary African-American novelists contribute both to the African-American literary tradition and to the social, artistic, and political conversations of early-twenty-first-century America. While one of our most important goals will be to explore the ways that fictional storytelling challenges accepted notions of race and identity, we will also examine how these authors respond to the expectations (and limitations) often imposed upon the “African American novel.” Throughout the semester, we’ll connect the innovations of our authors with other forms of Afro American art, including painting and jazz. But most importantly, we’ll be spending our time reading some of the most exciting novels ever written in America.

Course Objectives
1. To introduce students to a literary tradition that has a great deal to teach us about American history, about the power of literary art to critique and affect political and social realities, and about literature as a unique and powerful vehicle for self-expression and self-discovery.

2. As a course bearing the “D” distinction for the University Studies requirements, English 4450 is designed to help each student develop:

   • an appreciation of how the diversity of the constituent cultural traditions of the United States have shaped and continue to shape identity and national experience.

   • an understanding of how diverse values, attitudes, worldviews, and aesthetic traditions in the United States are shaped by selected viewpoints emanating from elements such as race, class, ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion, and age.

   • an ability to critically examine personal values, attitudes, and cultural identities.

I would only add to these articulations that we will also attempt to understand how the literature under examination is affected by its very status as a marker of “diversity.” In other words, to what extent does the “D” designation already affect the way we think about these novels—before we even crack the first page of our first book?

3. As in any Humanities class, my most important goal is to encourage each of you to grow reflective about your own relationship to the world that you live in. In this particular course, we will explore concepts (such as race, identity, freedom) that continue to shape our everyday lives as individuals and as a society. Literature (Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, for example, or Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada*) can challenge even our most deeply-held beliefs. As this is a crucial part of leading
an introspective life, our authors will seek to convince us of the ethical value of continuing to read even after graduation.

Course Requirements
Reading: Our reading schedule is reasonable. I expect that you will come to class having done the assigned reading. You should come to class ready to share any reactions and/or questions that emerge out of your reading. I reserve the right to give unannounced quizzes at any time.

Journal Entries: You will hand in four journal entries over the course of the semester. Think of these as notes you are each writing (to yourself, but also to me) about our readings and the conversations we’re having in class. I don’t want you to worry about polishing each entry into the kind of formal writing you’ll be doing on the essays. Instead, use them to get specific about your ideas and to help get your mind around the concepts we’re covering in class. How are these works important to our own early-twenty-first-century lives? How do they relate to the topics covered in your other classes? Why read this stuff at all? Please note that you should not simply churn these out and press “print.” You should really take some time to think about what you’re finding interesting and important at a particular spot in our semester. One page single spaced is plenty long enough, as long as your writing is clear enough to make good sense, and your ideas are specific—pointing to particular textual moments, comments from class, etc. In fact, it might be a good idea to use a passage or scene as a starting-point for these entries. Also, you might use a journal entry to work up an idea for one of the essays. I drop the lowest of the four grades on these so that you can have one opportunity to get your feet wet, so to speak.

Essays: You will hand in three essays over the course of the semester. While I might give you some suggested topics for the first essay or two, please remember that these are only topics. To write an effective essay you will need to formulate an original, convincing thesis that you support with ample textual evidence. Please leave time for careful revising and editing; all papers should be written in lucid, grammatical, college-level prose. The essays should be about five double-spaced pages each—not much more and certainly not much less. Evaluation of Essays: The goal of the essay is to engage deeply with a text to help us see the nuances and complexities of meaning that might have eluded our classroom conversations. Over the course of the essay, you should introduce us to the interests and goals of your discussion, walk us through your text to help us see precisely what you find important, and explain why you feel your argument about the text is significant and consequential. Your essay will be evaluated based on the originality and intelligence of your argument; the appropriateness of the textual excerpts; your analysis and interpretation of this textual evidence; the overall organization of the essay; and the clarity and effectiveness of your prose. Remember, it’s not enough to simply find passages that “prove” what you have to say. It isn’t really until you start talking in detail about these specific moments that you will even be able to develop your argument at all. In other words, don’t assume that each moment you bring in from the text will simply reaffirm what you state in your thesis. Each moment of close reading should certainly speak back to your overall argument, but it should also allow you to fine-tune and clarify the details and implications of your reading.

Final Exam: The Final will have two sections. On the first, you will be asked to identify passages from our reading and explain their significance to the text and to our class. The second section will ask you to write an essay bringing together several texts covering the entire semester.
Class Participation: I expect each of you to contribute thoughtfully to our classroom conversation. Please remember that participation does not only mean talking. I expect each student to listen carefully to all comments, and to respond thoughtfully with respect and civility.

Attendance and Punctuality: Both are required. For each unexcused absence after the fourth, you will lose five points (on a hundred-point scale) from your final grade for the semester. This means you could very well fail the course due to poor attendance. An absence is “excused” only after you speak with me ahead of time about a circumstance of extreme and rare importance. In addition, I accept late papers only under the most extreme circumstances, with appropriate penalty—and never without my prior approval.

Course Evaluation
- Essay #1: 15%
- Essay #2: 20%
- Essay #3: 20%
- Journal entries: 15% (5% each, lowest dropped)
- Final Exam: 25%
- Class Participation: 5%

Required Texts
- Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man
- Henry Louis Gates (editor), Three Classic African-American Novels
- Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God
- James Weldon Johnson, Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man
- Nella Larsen, Passing
- Toni Morrison, Beloved
- Ishmael Reed, Flight to Canada
- Richard Wright, Native Son

Additional Notes
Plagiarism: Plagiarism is the undocumented use of someone else’s work or ideas. Please note that I will utilize the university’s software to search for the internet source of any paper we find suspicious. Do not hesitate to talk with me if you have any questions about how to properly document your sources.

Students with disabilities: If you have a physical, learning, or psychological disability and require accommodations, please let me know as soon as possible.

Schedule of Assignments
- August 28: Introductions, etc.
- August 30: Excerpts from Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom, and The Confessions of Nat Turner (handout)
- September 1: William Wells Brown, Narrative of the Life and Escape (Gates, 5-44)
- 4: LABOR DAY—NO CLASS TODAY!
- 6: Brown, Clotel, 45-146
- 8: Clotel, 147-223
13 *Iola Leroy*, 306-388
15 *Iola Leroy*, 389-463 (FIRST JOURNAL ENTRY DUE TODAY)

18 Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 467-544
20 *The Marrow of Tradition*, 545-625
22 *The Marrow of Tradition*, 626-700

25 *The Marrow of Tradition*, 700-747
27 FIRST ESSAY DUE TODAY

October
2 *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 48-100
4 Nella Larsen, *Passing*, 9-47
6 *Passing*, 51-114 (SECOND JOURNAL ENTRY DUE TODAY)

9 Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 1-75
11 *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 76-167
13 *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 168-193

16 SECOND ESSAY DUE TODAY
18 Richard Wright, *Native Son*, 7-92
20 MIDSEMESTER BREAK—NO CLASS TODAY!

23 *Native Son*, 93-174
25 *Native Son*, 174-254
27 *Native Son*, 254-341

30 *Native Son*, 341-393 (THIRD JOURNAL ENTRY DUE TODAY)

November
1 Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 1-97
3 *Invisible Man*, 98-195

6 *Invisible Man*, 196-295
8 *Invisible Man*, 296-408
10 *Invisible Man*, 409-512

13 *Invisible Man*, 513-581
15 THIRD ESSAY DUE TODAY; also Ishmael Reed, *Flight to Canada*, 3-21
17 *Flight to Canada*, 22-106

20 *Flight to Canada*, 107-179
22 THANKSGIVING BREAK
24 THANKSGIVING BREAK

27 Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, 1-75
29 *Beloved*, 76-173

December
1 *Beloved*, 174-277
4 Beloved, 278-324
6 FOURTH JOURNAL ENTRY DUE TODAY; also, bring some possible essay questions for the Final Exam to class today
8 Review for Final Exam

*****Final Exam will be given on Friday, Dec. 13, from 10:15-12:15*****