



ENGL 441 (Section 32749R): American Literature 1865-1920: “The African American Novel and the Nadir, 1877-1919”

Units: 4
Semester: Spring 2025
Days/Time: M and W 2:00-3:20 pm
Location: THH 213
Instructor: Prof. Melissa Daniels-Rauterkus,
Associate Professor of English

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Office Hours: M and W 12:00-1:00 pm
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IT Help: USC Information Technology Services
Hours of Service: Telephone support available 24 hours a day, 7 days per week; Email support available M-F 8:00am-6:00 pm.
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Course Description: In his 1954 book, *The Negro in American Life and Thought*, the celebrated African American historian and activist Rayford Logan dubbed the period from the end of Reconstruction through the early 20th century the “nadir” because it was without a doubt one of the lowest moments in the history of American race relations since the Civil War.

Having lost many of the civil rights acquired in the aftermath of emancipation, African Americans were introduced to a new form of racial oppression vis-à-vis Jim Crow. Predicated on the premise that segregation was necessary to preserve white supremacy and racial purity, Jim Crow found its most virulent expression in the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case, *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which not only implemented the infamous “separate but equal” ruling, but also gave legal sanction to racial discrimination, violence, and disenfranchisement against Black people.



This course will explore how African American writers responded to and transformed these events through the artistic and political space of the novel. Reading a selection of representative work, we will consider many questions, including: What did it mean to be a Black American at the turn of the century? What is the relationship between literature and society? How does the unfinished business of Reconstruction continue to play out in today’s racial environment?

Learning Objectives

- define the historical period known as the “nadir”
- understand the legal and cultural system of racial segregation and management known as “Jim Crow”
- comprehend how a group of representative African American writers responded to and transformed the cultural logic of segregation and racial violence
- trace shifting definitions of “Black” identity and ideas about the role of the novel in the project of racial uplift
- reflect on a literary work and craft a written response that prioritizes your own thoughts and feelings
- synthesize a variety of materials—both primary and secondary, written and visual—and determine how the racial dynamics of Reconstruction live on today? What can literary and cultural production from this period teach us about American identity?

Required Readings and Materials:

Books:

Pauline Hopkins, *Contending Forces* (1900)
Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901)
Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Sport of the Gods* (1902)
James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912)

Films:

Ethnic Notions (1987)
Frontline, Documenting Hate: Charlottesville (2018)
Reconstruction: America After the Civil War (2019)



*Note: You may use any edition or format (print or digital) of the required texts that you desire. To supplement our understanding of the primary texts on the reading list, we will also read a few scholarly essays, which are listed on the course schedule that follows. You can find PDFs of these essays on Brightspace.

**All books are available for purchase/rent at the USC Bookstore: 840 Childs Way, Los Angeles 90089 (213) 740-0066.

Description and Assessment of Assignments:

1. **Reaction Paper (2x/1 page each)**—Select either a chapter from one of the novels we've read or an essay and draft a response to it. Prioritize your personal experience reading and thinking about the work. What experiences and/or feelings did it evoke? What impact did it have on you? What are the major takeaways, as you see them? You don't need to use any secondary sources to complete this assignment. I want to know what you think.
2. **End of Term Assignment: Reflective Essay (10 pages)**—Why does the nadir matter? Why should we study this historical period today and/or read African American literature inspired by it? What lessons does African American literature produced during this time hold for us? What truths about America, race, class, and gender emerge in the novels we read and discussed? How does the legacy/unfinished business of the nadir live on in American life today? Why do you think racial tensions have persisted and/or have been reignited and what might be done to address the problem?

Grading Breakdown

Assignment	Points	% of Grade
Attendance & Participation	100	10
Reaction Paper #1	100	30
Reaction Paper #2	100	30
Final Paper	100	30
TOTAL	300	100

Grading Scale

Course final grades will be determined using the following scale

A	93-100	C	73-76
A-	90-92	C-	70-72
B+	87-89	D+	67-69
B	83-86	D	63-66
B-	80-82	D-	60-62
C+	77-79	F	59 and below

Assignment Submission Policy

Assignments are due on the day listed on the syllabus. Essays must be typed and double-spaced. Please submit a printed hard copy in class.

Grading Timeline

All assignments will be graded and returned no later than two weeks after submission. Final papers will not be returned unless requested.

Additional Policies

1. **Attendance and Participation:** Consistent attendance and participation is critical to your success in this class. If you miss a class, then you should reach out to another student in the class for notes or make an appointment to see me during office hours. Please do not come to class late or leave early, as this is disruptive to me and your fellow classmates. If you need to arrive late or leave early on a specific day, please let me know as soon as possible.
2. **Course Format/Meeting Structure:** The format of this course is a mixture of lecture, discussion, and applied learning activities. I'm a big fan of the "flipped" classroom, in which activities that would traditionally be assigned as homework are completed during class time. Towards this end, I may use freewriting exercises, media, visual art, op-eds, supplemental readings, or other aids to enhance our understanding of the material and structure our time in class. Always bring your reading and writing materials to our meetings. Class will generally begin with an icebreaker/warm up activity—e.g. we might discuss a quote, screen a clip, or engage in a freewriting activity. After this, I/or another student might present important information in the form of a mini-lecture, guided discussion, or a reaction paper. Other times, I will give you an applied learning activity to work on in a pair or smaller group. Class will end with a summary/wrap-up of the material discussed.
4. **Email:** I will respond to emails during normal business hours, Monday through Friday, from 9 am to 5 pm. Emails sent outside of this window will be responded to during the next business day. I generally reply to emails within a day, but if it takes me longer, please be patient.
5. **Office Hours:** I am available for walk-in office hour visits on Mondays and Wednesdays from 12:00-1:00 pm—no appointment necessary. If this time slot doesn't work for you, then please email me to set up a Zoom appointment. I typically schedule Zoom sessions in 20-minute increments. In office hours, I can elaborate on class discussions and help with assignments.

Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

*Note: assignments are subject to change at the instructor's discretion.

	Topics/Daily Activities	Readings/Homework	Deliverable/ Due
Week 1	1/13: Introductions, Course Overview, and Syllabus	Watch <i>Reconstruction: America After the Civil War</i> , episodes 1 and 2 (USC Libraries)	
	1/15: <i>Reconstruction</i> , episodes 1 and 2	No homework	

Week 2	1/20: MLK Day/No Class 1/22: <i>Reconstruction</i> , episodes 3 and 4	Watch <i>Reconstruction: America After the Civil War</i> , episodes 3 and 4 (USC Libraries) No homework	
Week 3	1/27: Intro. to Pauline Hopkins and <i>Contending Forces</i> 1/29: <i>Contending Forces</i> , (preface, chs. I-III), pp. 13-64	<i>Contending Forces</i> , (preface, chs. I-III), pp. 13-64 <i>Contending Forces</i> , (chs. IV-VII), pp. 65-140	
Week 4	2/3: <i>Contending Forces</i> , (chs. IV-VII), pp. 65-140 2/5: <i>Contending Forces</i> , (chs. VIII-IX), pp. 141-182	<i>Contending Forces</i> , (chs. VIII-IX), pp. 141-182 <i>Contending Forces</i> , (chs. X-XIV), pp. 183-262	Reaction Paper #1 Due
Week 5	2/10: <i>Contending Forces</i> , (chs. X-XIV), pp. 183-262 2/12: <i>Contending Forces</i> , (chs. XV-XVII), pp. 263-302	<i>Contending Forces</i> , (chs. XV-XVII), pp. 263-302 <i>Contending Forces</i> , (chs. XVIII-XXII), pp. 303-402	
Week 6	2/17: President's Day/No Class 2/19: <i>Contending Forces</i> , (chs. XVIII-XXII), pp. 303-402; Intro. to Charles Chesnutt and <i>The Marrow of Tradition</i>	Finish <i>Contending Forces</i> , (chs. XVIII-XXII), pp. 303-402 <i>The Marrow of Tradition</i> , (chs. I-VIII), pp. 5-54	
Week 7	2/24: <i>The Marrow of Tradition</i> , (chs. I-VIII), pp. 5-54 2/26: <i>The Marrow of Tradition</i> , (chs. IX-XVIII), pp. 54-101	<i>The Marrow of Tradition</i> , (chs. IX-XVIII), pp. 54-101 <i>The Marrow of Tradition</i> , (chs. XVIII-XXXV), pp. 101-177	

Week 8	3/3: <i>The Marrow of Tradition</i> , (chs. XVIII-XXXV), pp. 101-177 3/5: <i>The Marrow of Tradition</i> , (chs. XXXV-XXXVII), pp. 177-195	<i>The Marrow of Tradition</i> , (chs. XXXV-XXXVII), pp. 177-195 Jae Roe, "Keeping an Old Wound Alive: <i>The Marrow of Tradition</i> and the Legacy of Wilmington"	
Week 9	3/10: Roe 3/12: Intro. to Paul Laurence Dunbar and <i>The Sport of the Gods</i>	No homework <i>The Sport of the Gods</i> , (chs. I-VII), pp. 321-362	Reaction Paper #2 Due
Week 10	Spring Break/No Class		
Week 11	3/24: <i>The Sport of the Gods</i> , (chs. I-VII), pp. 321-362 3/26: <i>The Sport of the Gods</i> , (chs. VIII-XIII), pp. 363-406	<i>The Sport of the Gods</i> , (chs. VIII-XIII), pp. 363-406 <i>The Sport of the Gods</i> , (chs. XIV-XVIII), pp. 407-433	
Week 12	3/31: <i>The Sport of the Gods</i> , (chs. XIV-XVIII), pp. 407-433 4/2: Rodgers; Intro. to James Weldon Johnson and <i>The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man</i>	Lawrence Rodgers, "The Doubly Conscious World of Plantation Fiction" <i>The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man</i> (Preface, chs. I-V), pp. 3-48	
Week 13	4/7: <i>The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man</i> (Preface, chs. I-V), pp. 3-48 4/9: <i>The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man</i> (chs. VI-IX), pp. 48-77	<i>The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man</i> (chs. VI-IX), pp. 48-77 <i>The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man</i> (chs. X-XI), pp. 78-110	

Week 14	4/14: <i>The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man</i> (chs. X-XI), pp. 78-110 4/16: Japtok	Martin Japtok, “Between Race as Construct and Race as Essence” Marlon Riggs, <i>Ethnic Notions</i> (USC Libraries/Films on Demand)	
Week 15	4/21: <i>Ethnic Notions</i> 4/23: The New Nadir: McGuire	Patricia McGuire, “Charlottesville: American Tragedy Redux” <i>Frontline Documenting Hate: Charlottesville</i> (USC Libraries)	
Week 16	4/28: <i>Frontline Documenting Hate: Charlottesville</i> 4/30: Course wrap up and reflection activities	Work on final paper Work on final paper	
FINAL			Final Paper due by 5/7

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Conduct:

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

Support Systems:

Student Counseling Services (SCS) – (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention. engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – 1 (800) 273-8255

Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) – (213) 740-4900 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.
engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp

Sexual Assault Resource Center

For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website:
sarc.usc.edu

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX Compliance – (213) 740-5086

Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. equity.usc.edu

Bias Assessment Response and Support

Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response.
studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support

The Office of Disability Services and Programs

Provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange relevant accommodations. dsp.usc.edu *Student Support and Advocacy – (213) 821-4710*

Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic. studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa

Diversity at USC

Information on events, programs and training, the Diversity Task Force (including representatives for each school), chronology, participation, and various resources for students. diversity.usc.edu

USC Emergency Information

Provides safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible. emergency.usc.edu

USC Department of Public Safety – UPC: (213) 740-4321 – HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24-hour emergency or to report a crime.

Provides overall safety to USC community. dps.usc.edu