

ENGL 10408

The African American Novel: Satire and Critique

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Class times and location: _____
Office hours: _____, or by appointment



Images, clockwise from top left: 1998 French edition cover of Ishmael Reed's 1972 novel *Mumbo Jumbo* (Editions De L'olivier), promotional image for 2023 film *American Fiction* (Amazon MGM), photograph of 1931 unemployed march in St. Louis (Missouri History Museum Library and Research Center), AI-generated cover art for George Schuyler's 1931 novel *Black No More* (GPT-4),

Satire is just beneath the surface of our latest prose, and tonic irony has come into our poetic wells. These are good medicines for the common mind, for us they are necessary antidotes against social poison. Their influence means that at least for us the worst symptoms of the social distemper are passing. And so the social promise of our recent art is as great as the artistic.

Alain Locke, "Negro Youth Speaks" (1925)

Course Description

This course explores the centrality of satire to African American literature. As we examine fiction written by African Americans under the racist regime of Jim Crow and in its aftermath, we will approach satire as a flexible expressive practice that shapes critical judgment into an artistic form. Foundational to the form of the novel, satire is one of the oldest means by which literature has tried to intervene in the world. Equally entertaining and transgressive, its mode of attack against the status quo can range from undisguised vitriol to winking subtlety, from surrealism to realism. By examining the genre of satire in general and in a set of African American novels and short stories, we will attend to how narrative fiction can critique the category of race and attempt to effect social change. Focusing on the relationship between racism and capitalism in the U.S., we will integrate readings in literary criticism, critical theory, and social history to inform our study of fictional works.

Course Overview

The course opens by surveying the 1920s-30s efflorescence of African American literature, a period now known as the Harlem Renaissance. A selection of foundational essays lays out the intellectual, aesthetic, and political stakes of this moment in American literary history and familiarizes us with the genre of satire. We then turn to recent works of critical theory that draw on a Marxist tradition of analyzing racism. Our aim here is to historicize the role of race as an idea central to two institutions, U.S. chattel slavery and Jim Crow segregation—institutions that together (particularly the latter) constitute the socio-historical backdrop against which African American literature emerges as a literary project. Thus oriented to key historical and theoretical dimensions of African American literature, we read the first great African American satire: George Schuyler's 1931 novel *Black No More*. This science-fictional send-up of Jim Crow racism concretizes our study, in parallel to our novel reading, of the various historical uses and literary-critical meanings of satire as a mode of artistic expression.

Before we jump across the twentieth century to the dawn of the post-Jim-Crow era, a critical-theory interlude opens up questions of periodizing African American literature, of the relationship between the idea of race and artistic production, and of historical shifts in the political economy of racism in the U.S. Then, in counterpoint to Schuyler's realist satire, Ishmael Reed's 1972 novel *Mumbo Jumbo* presents us with a more surreal, carnivalesque version of the satirical novel. As we analyze the formal experimentation and political aims of Reed's "NeoHooDoo" aesthetic, we will consider its historical specificity within the trajectory of African American satire we have traced across the twentieth century.

We then arrive at the twenty-first century. We read Percival Everett's 2001 novel *Erasure*, a biting satire of the persistence of racism in American literary culture that melds the realist orientation of Schuyler with some of Reed's formal experimentation. Everett's novel stages a controversial question: can African American literature coherently persist beyond the Jim Crow era? As we debate this question in light of the works and discourses we have studied, we conclude with a screening of Cord Jefferson's 2023 film *American Fiction*. This adaptation of Everett's novel brings the course's exploration of the nexus of racism, social critique, and satirical artistic expression up to our present moment.

Learning Goals

You should be able to get a few things out of this course. By the end, you will have a deeper understanding of 1. the nature of African American literature as a cultural project and the role satire plays within it, 2. how satire operates as a form, mode, or genre of narrative expression, and 3. how

the concept of race functions within African American literature and, more broadly, within capitalism. You will develop your own critical perspective on past and present discourses surrounding the idea of race. You will also learn or refine techniques for analyzing various forms of media, from narrative fiction and film to literary and critical theory. These skills will be valuable in other humanities courses and may help you become a more discerning culture-consumer and political subject. No prior knowledge or experience is required. Anyone who is committed to seriously engaging with the course material will do well.

Course Texts to Purchase:

(note the ISBN; all other readings will be posted on Canvas as PDFs)

- George Schuyler, *Black No More* (Penguin Classics, 2018). ISBN: 978-0143131885
- Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (Scribner, 1996). ISBN: 978-0684824772
- Percival Everett, *Erasure* (Graywolf, 2011). ISBN: 978-1555975999
- Cord Jefferson, *American Fiction* (2023). Available on most streaming platforms.

Requirements and Policies

Reading. Read and reread. Take notes; underline and circle words and phrases; mark important passages, writing them out by hand to understand them if necessary. Essentially, be an active reader. Your commonplace book will be essential here (more on this under “Assignments” below). Plan your time. Complete the reading before each session, give yourself time to think about the texts before class, and arrive with at least a handful of points and questions for discussion. Bring everything you have read thus far and all of your reading notes to class. NOTE: Unless needed as a disability accommodation, the use of screens—including laptops, tablets, phones, watches, augmented reality glasses, etc.—is not permitted in the classroom. I will print out PDFs and distribute them at the end of each class session. PDF readings are also available on Canvas.

Attendance, deadlines. Attendance at every class session is required; more than two unexcused absences will be grounds for failing the course. Any excuse for absence must be presented in writing before the next meeting of the class. Assignment due dates are provided on the syllabus so that you can plan your work for the semester. Extensions on writing assignments will be available but must be requested as far in advance as possible; failure to request an extension ahead of time may result in its denial. Late assignments will be docked half a letter grade each day they are late.

Academic honesty. I look forward to reading your work, which is to say, engaging with the ideas that you will write out to the best of your ability by drawing on what you have read and your own reasoning. Presenting ideas or phrases produced by other people or algorithms as if they are your own is plagiarism. Thus, when you use the work of other people, cite it correctly and consistently in MLA or Chicago style. It is crucial that you are familiar with these standards, and it is your responsibility to familiarize yourself with them. If these standards are in any way unclear to you, please consult with me and/or your Writing Specialist. Academic dishonesty is a very serious offense, even if it is unintentional. Any form of academic dishonesty may result in immediate failure of this course and disciplinary action.

AI policy. The use of generative artificial intelligence (e.g., ChatGPT, Bard, Grammarly AI features, etc.) is prohibited on all writing assignments. Struggling to compose a clear and insightful phrase, sentence, or paragraph is how we learn to think critically through writing. Outsourcing this process to an algorithm short-circuits this process and produces inane critical prose, wasting both your time and mine. Your thoughts matter. Don’t throw them into an algorithmic blender. I expect you to

practice critical writing in all its thrilling difficulty. If English is an additional language for you, you might consider the resources available at UChicago's English Language Institute, <https://esl.uchicago.edu/>.

Accessibility and Student Disability Services (SDS). I am committed to doing whatever I can to make the course and its materials accessible. Students with disabilities who have been approved for the use of particular academic accommodations by SDS and need reasonable accommodation(s) to participate fully in this course should follow the procedures established by SDS. You can contact SDS by email (disabilities@uchicago.edu), by phone (773-702-6000), and via its website (disabilities.uchicago.edu).

Mental Health and Wellness. College life can be extremely stressful, and I recognize that the transition to college poses challenges for all students. Remember that you have in place a network of people who are ready and willing to help. Your College Advisor, your Resident Heads and Resident Assistants, and the staff at Student Counseling are available to you should you need or want to talk. You can find a description of services at wellness.uchicago.edu/mental-health.

Historical language and disturbing content. (Attention: this paragraph mentions offensive language.) We will encounter, contextualize, and critique racist language and ideas in this course. Language pertaining to race that was once commonplace in American English (e.g. "Negro," "Colored," "Mulatto") is now considered outdated and/or generally offensive. Inversely, language pertaining to race that that we may take for granted today (e.g., "Black") was, in the past, often held to be offensive, and debates about matters of capitalization have a complicated history. When relevant, we will discuss these historical changes in how people talk about race. We will be generous to each other as we work together to use language that is precise, critical, and respectful. Trust in the good intentions of others will be essential to this process. That said, we will encounter racist epithets that we will not quote aloud, for the sake of respect and pedagogical effectiveness (acknowledging the complexity of ongoing debates about academic freedom, ascriptive identity, and the distinction between use and mention). Primarily and perhaps exclusively, the epithet in question is "nigger." When speaking, we will refer to this racist slur as "N-word." When writing, we will quote it when an instance of its use is relevant to literary analysis. If you feel that another epithet we encounter should be treated similarly, do not hesitate to let me know and/or bring it up in class discussion. Communication is key. Accordingly, I will do my best to give content warnings about particularly disturbing content in course material so that you can engage with such content to the best of your ability.

Assignments and Evaluation

Essays. You will write two for this course. I will share prompts for these essays on Canvas well in advance of their submission deadlines.

Grade breakdown.

Informed participation in class, 20%.

Commonplace book, 6 entries, 20%.

Creative-Critical writing exercise, 2-3 pages, 10%.

Midterm essay, 4-5 pages (revision encouraged), 20%.

Final essay, drafting exercises, and prospectus presentation, 5-7 pages, 30%.

Participation. This course is a seminar: we succeed or fail collectively. Arrive at each of our class sessions ready to talk and ready to listen. If a text excites you, talk about why. If something confuses you, ask questions. If you agree with comments someone makes, elaborate on your agreement for

the class. If you disagree with someone, explain why. In short, contribute to our common intellectual enterprise. I evaluate participation in terms of quality rather than quantity. To explore questions and ideas you develop in your reading and in our class discussions, I encourage you to attend my office hours or email me to find other times. Even if your question or idea feels inchoate, don't hesitate to come by or get in touch. Similarly, if you feel that you're struggling to participate, for whatever reason, let me know. We will find ways for you to contribute. Let's think together.

Commonplace book. You will create this dynamic book of quotations, annotations, questions, observations, diagrams, drawings, etc., over the course of the quarter. You must use a physical notebook and write by hand, unless you require other accommodations. Throughout the quarter, you must write at least nine entries in your commonplace book as a way to organize your thinking. Each entry must incorporate these five components:

1. *Copy out* one substantial passage from the week's reading that is intriguing or confounding or related to broader questions/themes explored within the course. You'll be reading by hand, so to speak. This practice should train your attention on things like syntax, rhythm, diction. Focus on what resonates with your particular interests. Good choices will be moments in the text that you feel helpfully illuminate the larger argument or point, that raise questions for you on a first read and that you think you'd like to spend more time with, or ones that you simply find difficult, even confounding. Occasionally, you may also feel drawn to a passage that is beautiful or moving! Be sure to note the title of the work and the page number of the passage you've chosen.
2. *Annotate* this handwritten text, identifying important terms or themes, pulling out memorable turns of phrase or strategies of argument or description, commenting on the text through a process of explication and unpacking (the Latin root *explicare* means "to unfold"). Feel free to color-code, draw pictures/diagrams/lines, or use other creative annotations. Week to week, I will also do my best to print out images so that you can mark them up. Get creative!
3. Include one to two interesting *questions* you have about the material.
4. In two to three bullet points, note your *observations* about the passage.
5. Note the *key term(s)* of the reading and define it/them in your own words. E.g., "impressionism," "automatism," "unconscious," etc.

Once per week, you must upload a fully readable photo of an entry written that week to Canvas using the submission pages under the "Assignments" tab. Thus, you will upload nine entries throughout the quarter—no make-ups will be granted. Entries will not only help you write essays; more immediately, they will help you prepare for class discussion, and you should have your commonplace book ready at hand in class. Finally, and crucially, your commonplace book should not be the only form of notes you take for this class—it is meant to lend structure to your note-taking, which, in one form or another, should accompany any reading you do for this course. You might think of your commonplace book as the place you turn, beyond your usual notebook or notes document, when you are particularly struck by a passage and want to dig deeper. You might find yourself writing an entry several times a week, or you might just write the nine that are required. Figure out what works best for you.

Essay Writing. Apart from your commonplace book and other notes you take, *all* of the writing you do for credit in this course must be *directly performed* in the Google Doc found under the Collaborations tab in Canvas. This includes essays and short assignments that you will complete in conjunction with your reading. The latter may include brief responses to questions, close reading of a sentence or image, outlining an argument, and so on. NOTE: You may *not* copy/paste external writing into your Google Doc. If you are found to have done so (found, that is, via the Google Doc's revision history) the writing in question will, by default, be considered generative AI-use and

will not be evaluated for credit. On a case-by-case basis, instances of suspected generative AI-use may lead to an entire re-write, a grade penalty, or more serious consequences. In essence, localizing your writing in this way is the best means I've yet found of ensuring that I am able to engage with your writing—your *thinking*—and not that of probabilistic machine. Google Docs also facilitates dynamic and detailed forms of writerly collaboration and feedback.

Formatting. All essays should be formatted in 12-point, double-spaced Times New Roman font, with a header (assignment name, submission date), a title, and footnoted citations in Chicago or MLA style (no need for a bibliography). Each assignment should begin as a new section within your Google Doc and the title of each assignment should be formatted as a heading (this produces a useful table of contents).

Submitting. To submit your assignment, email me before 11:59pm on the date that it is due, then make no further edits to your Google Doc. If you email me at 12:30am that next morning, that is OK. 4am is pushing it. Plan ahead and don't lose sleep. Any late changes to the assignment will be deleted because I will revert the document back to its original form at submission.

Schedule of Readings and Assignments

(unless noted directly above, all readings are available on Canvas under the Modules tab)

Week 1: Introduction

- Frederick Douglass, "The Present," excerpt from "What, to the Slave, is the Fourth of July?" (1852); George Schuyler, "Our Greatest Gift to America" (1929); Jessie Fauset, "The Gift of Laughter" (1925); film clips of Bert Williams.
- W.E.B. DuBois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" from *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903); DuBois, "Criteria of Negro Art" (1926); Zora Neal Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934); Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), George Schuyler, "The Negro Art Hokum" (1926) [34 dense pages]

Writing Exercise Assigned

Week 2: The Critique of Race I

- Karen E. Fields and Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (2012), author's note, 1-24, 111-48, [61 dense pages]
- Judith Stein, "Defining the Race," 1890-1930 (2019); Zora Neal Hurston, "The Emperor Effaces Himself" (1925); Adolph Reed, "Marx, Race, and Neoliberalism" (2013) [31 pages (27 dense)]

Writing Exercise Due

Week 3: *Black No More* I

- David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1997), preface, 1-49; George Schuyler, *Black No More* (1931), ch. 1, 2, and 3 [92 pages]
- Schuyler, *Black No More*, ch. 4, 5, and 6 [50 pages]

Week 4: *Black No More* II

Midterm Essay Assigned

- Schuyler, *Black No More*, ch. 7, 8, 9, and 10; Jonathan Greenberg, *The Cambridge Introduction to Satire* (2019). Chapters 1 and 2 [78 pages (30 dense)]

- Schuyler, *Black No More*, ch. 11, 12, and 13; excerpt from Lisa Siraganian, *Modernism and the Meaning of Corporate Persons*, 1-3, 177-91, 199-208 [65 pages, 23 dense]

Week 5: The Critique of Race II

- Ralph Ellison, “The World and the Jug” (1963); Kenneth W. Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (2011), 1-44, 118-48 [87 dense pages (74 of which are short)]
- Re-read DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1-7; Adolph L. Reed, “The ‘Color Line’ Then and Now: *The Souls of Black Folk* and the Changing Context of Black American Politics” [39 dense pages]

Midterm Essay Due

Week 6: Mumbo Jumbo I

- Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) [pages?]; excerpts from M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 106-135 [29 dense pages]
- Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* [pages?]

Midterm essay revision due

Week 7: Mumbo Jumbo II and Erasure I

Final essay and prospectus assigned

- Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* [pages?]; excerpt from Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), 217-238; Theodore O. Mason Jr., “Performance, History, and Myth: The Problem of Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*,” [33 dense pages]
- Percival Everett, *Erasure* (2001), 1-62 [62 pages]

Week 8: Erasure II

Final essay drafting exercise due

- Ralph Ellison, excerpt from *Invisible Man*, 1-33, Everett, *Erasure*, 63-131 [101 pages]
- Everett, *Erasure*, 132-211 [79 pages]

[Thanksgiving Break]

Week 9: The Contemporary

Final exercise drafting exercise II due, arrange meetings

- Everett, *Erasure*, 212-265 [53 pages], Cord Jefferson, *American Fiction* (2023)
- Saidiya Hartman, “Crow Jane Makes a Modest Proposal” (2024)

Final Essay Due