The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural movement of black artists and writers in the 1920s. Centered in the Harlem neighborhood in Manhattan, the movement extended outward through international collaboration. We will be reading works by writers including Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston and as well as manifestos about the nature and function of black art. Themes include migration and metropolitan life, primitivism and the avant garde, diaspora and exile, passing and identity, sexuality and secrecy, and the relation between modern art and folk tradition.

READING

Jean Toomer, *Cane* (Liveright)
Nella Larsen, *Passing* (Penguin)
Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Harper Collins)
Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (Harper Collins)

All other required reading is on the course website. Optional materials listed as “Related Works” on the schedule are also on the website. Optional materials listed as “Background” are held on reserve in Moffitt Library. Be sure to read the required works before turning to the supplementary materials.

UNIVERSITY POLICIES

This course is subject to university policies governing academic integrity, nondiscrimination, disability accommodation, and sexual harassment. Links to these policies are available on the course website.

EVALUATION

25% Weekly Questions and Classroom Participation
20% Midterm Exam: Identification and Interpretation
20% Final Exam: Identification, Interpretation, and Synthesis
35% Final Essay: 10-12 pages, including Preparation Assignments
WEEKLY QUESTIONS

Before 11pm on Sunday nights, you will submit 2-3 questions about the week’s reading. Questions are to be entered under “Assignments” on the course website. All late submissions will receive half credit. Be sure to explain your questions in sufficient detail, using quotations and other examples as needed. Work hard to formulate real questions—questions, in other words, to which you do not already have answers. When writing your questions, please keep in mind the following criteria:

**Good questions are debatable.** When a question is debatable, it is possible to imagine several reasonable answers. This means that we won't all agree right away about the answer to a good question. It also means that a good question cannot be answered simply by recalling a fact or pointing to a sentence on the page. Good questions make for long conversations. They can't be answered in a few words. You know you have an especially good question if you think that we will continue to disagree about the answer even after we have made our best arguments.

**Good questions are precise.** When you’re asking a good question, you know the answer will not seem like mere opinion. When you’re responding to a good question, you know that you need evidence to convince others to accept your answer. Frequently, good questions point to specific passages and ask about their significance. Sometimes, they use technical language to communicate clearly—this may be necessary, for instance, in describing formal conventions or accounting for the theoretical presuppositions we bring to the study of literature and culture.

**Good questions are significant.** People care about the answers to good questions. When you hear a good question, you want to spend time to answer it. When a good question is asked, there is something immediately at stake for the listener as well as the speaker. However, it is the speaker’s responsibility to explain exactly what is at stake in asking the question.

EXAMS

There are two comprehensive exams in this course, covering all material up to the date of the exam.

The midterm has two parts. The first half of the exam occurs during class on March 20. It asks you to identify passages (author and title) and to explain their importance to the works in which they appear. The second half of the midterm is completed outside of class. It is open book. It asks you to compare and contrast specific works. It is submitted under “Assignments” on the course website on March 22.

There is also a take-home final exam. It will ask you to respond to two broad questions about African American literary history. It is due under “Assignments” on the course website on May 15.
ESSAYS

Essays are 10-12 pages, double spaced, plus bibliography. Essays must be submitted by May 13. I do not give prompts for essays. You will compose the question that you attempt to answer in your essay. When writing your question, make sure it meets our criteria for a good question (debatable, precise, and significant). The scale of your question may need be adjusted so it is appropriate for a ten-page essay. This is to be expected. You are encouraged to refine your question during the writing process.

Essays are anticipated by three preparation assignments.

1. **Annotated Bibliography.** Before you formulate your essay question, it is helpful to explore additional sources related to the general topic you are planning to address. These may include contextual materials as well as recent works of theory, history, and criticism. Your annotated bibliography should include at least six entries, formatted according to your preferred system. Each entry should be followed by 3-4 sentences, summarizing the work and evaluating its potential relevance to your research. The bibliography is due on April 12.

2. **Essay Proposal.** Essays are also anticipated by formal written proposals, which you are to submit before April 19. Your essay proposal should include the following parts:

   - **One Good Question**, and a list of potential answers. Be sure your question satisfies our established criteria (debatable, precise, and significant), and be sure to explain your potential answers in sufficient detail, using examples to make your ideas as clear and concrete as possible. If you are able to identify only one reasonable answer to your question, you should ask yourself whether it merits an essay-length investigation.

   - **Draft of the Introduction**, laid out in the following sequence. First, the introduction should explain the question your essay answers and indicate why it is worth asking. Second, it should summarize a common-sense answer to your question, an answer that most people are willing to accept at face value. Third, it should identify a problem with the common-sense answer, perhaps a contradiction in its reasoning or an overlooked detail that it cannot explain. Fourth, it should provide a new-and-improved answer to your question that resolves or accounts for the problem that you have just described. This new-and-improved answer is the thesis statement or main claim of your essay.

   - **Catalog of Evidence**, including at least ten examples to support your argument. These may be quotations or your own descriptions of chapters, scenes, or other aspects from the text under consideration. Your catalog should include bits from secondary sources, ideally drawn from works you have already included in your annotated bibliography.

3. **Close Reading:** Choose a prose passage or complete poem that is important to the question that you are considering in your essay. Likely, you will want to choose an example included in the catalog of evidence from your proposal. Your close reading should be submitted under “Assignments” on the course website before May 3. It should include the following parts:
Detailed Description, laid out as a list of attributes. What is the literal meaning of the passage? Who are its characters, where is its set, what events are presented, and how and why are these events taking place? Can the passage be separated into sections or segments? How do these sections relate to one another? What are the most important words in the passage? Why? Look them up in the Oxford English Dictionary (oed.com). What kind of verbs are used in the passage? What kind of nouns? Is there any pattern? Are other things implied or suggested in the passage in addition to its literal meaning? Are there important things left unsaid? What about its style? Its syntax? If it is a poem, does it have regular meter and rhyme? If so, what are they? Does the passage include dialect? Figurative language? Metaphors or other devices? Is there irony? Is the irony stable or unstable? Are there allusions? Who is speaking in the passage? From what point of view? Does the passage tell us things about its narrator or other characters? How does the passage relate to the plot or the larger themes developed in the work?

Acknowledgement and Response, in which you consider how your passage might appear to readers inclined to think differently about your essay question. Begin by looking at the potential answers to your question listed in your essay proposal. How would someone committed to one of these common-sense answers see the passage? What might they miss or misunderstand about the passage? In what ways does your answer to your essay’s question provide a better or more complete perspective on the passage? Answer the questions by writing a paragraph in which you acknowledge how others might read the passage before responding by explaining how your perspective accounts for aspects of the passage that others have failed to notice or comprehend.

Close Reading. Type or paste your poem or passage as if you were using it as a block quotation in an essay. Drawing information from your detailed description and your acknowledgement and response, write a paragraph explicating your passage, paying close attention to its form as well as its content, interpreting both obvious and more subtle aspects of the passage in light of the question you are addressing in your essay.

IMPORTANT DATES

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BACKGROUND READING

The following books are suggested background reading for the course. They are held on reserve in Moffitt Library. Do not hesitate to ask me for reading suggestions relevant to your research interests.

Jervis Anderson, *This Was Harlem*
Valerie Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows*
George Chauncey, *Gay New York*
Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*
Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty*
Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*
Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*
Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*
Samuel Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*
Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Who Set You Flowin?*
Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile*
Nathan Huggins, *The Harlem Renaissance*
George Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen*
George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*
Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*
James de Jongh, *Vicious Modernism*
David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*
Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*
Jeffrey Stewart, *The New Negro: The Life of Alain Locke*
Shane Vogel, *The Scene of the Harlem Cabaret*
Cheryl Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*
Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*
JAN 23  INTRODUCTION

The movement known in its time as the “Negro Renaissance” was only named in retrospect after the Harlem neighborhood in New York. It was one of several important cultural nationalist movements to emerge after the First World War. The Harlem Renaissance included not only artists and writers but influential editors and patrons. It was fostered by cultural institutions such as magazines, publishing houses, philanthropic foundations, civil rights organizations, museums, salons, and nightclubs.

JAN 28-30  CONFLICT AND COMMITMENT

McKay expresses militant themes in conventional verse, announcing the emergence of a “New Negro” by breaking with the plantation tradition. The sonnet captures the experience of exile and alienation. Du Bois, Randolph, and Garvey represent varieties of black internationalism after the First World War.

Reading: Claude McKay, Harlem Shadows (1922)

Related Works: Paul Laurence Dunbar, “A Negro Love Song” (1895)
A. Philip Randolph, “The Negro in Politics” (1919)
Marcus Garvey, “Africa for the Africans” (1921)
W. E. B. Du Bois, “Returning Soldiers” (1919)

FEB 4  COLOR AND CULTURE

Fauset depicts passing as a moral dilemma in which loyalty and self-interest are opposed. She argues for a literature that counters prevailing stereotypes by emphasizing black elite respectability. With Charles Johnson and Alain Locke, she builds institutions that promote the New Negro movement.

Reading: Jessie Fauset, “The Sleeper Wakes” (1920)

Jessie Fauset, “Some Notes on Color” (1922)
Walter White, “The Paradox of Color” (1925)
Lydia Maria Child, “The Quadroons” (1842)
FEB 6-11  BROTHER ESAU

Johnson disguises his novel as an autobiography, prompting questions about identity and authorship. Passing is a psychological problem whose complexity is implied by picaresque plotting and unreliable narration. The mission to transform folk heritage into fine art is derailed by the trauma of lynching.


Related Works:  W. E. B. Du Bois, “Strivings of the Negro People” (1897)
                James Weldon Johnson, “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” (1900)
                Fisk University Jubilee Singers, “Steal Away to Jesus” (1926)
                James Weldon Johnson, Preface to *Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922)

FEB 18-20  MIGRATION AND RETURN

Toomer announces the modern artist’s salvage mission to preserve the folk tradition of slavery, but face-to-face encounters in the rural south prove challenging and confusing. Migration accelerates the experience of modernization. Pastoral and gothic modes are conjoined in surreal black comedy.

Reading:  Jean Toomer, *Cane* (1923)

Related Works:  Waldo Frank, Foreword to *Cane* (1923)
                W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Negro As He Really Is” (1901)
                James Weldon Johnson, “O Black and Unknown Bards” (1917)
                Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration of the Negro* (1941)

FEB 25-27  PRODIGY

Cullen writes on beauty, love, and mortality in sensual and decorous poems. The conflict of Christian and pagan inclinations figures both the divided identity of the black poet and an ambivalence about homosexual desire. Cullen stands as both positive and negative example in manifestos on black art.

Reading:  Countee Cullen, *Color* (1925)

Related Works:  Countee Cullen, “The Black Christ” (1929)
                Countee Cullen, Foreword to *Caroling Dusk* (1927)
                Margaret Sperry, “Negro Boy Poet Tells His Story” (1924)
                Gwendolyn Bennett, “Heritage” (1923) and “To Usward” (1924)
ENTER THE NEW NEGRO

Locke attempts to encompass the New Negro movement prospectively rather than retrospectively. The anthology form reveals a modernist understanding of culture that recalls museum display. Reclamation of African style in visual and plastic arts is intertwined with the history of colonialism.

Reading: Alain Locke, “The New Negro” (1925)
           Alain Locke, “The Negro Spirituals” (1925)
           Alain Locke, “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts” (1925)
           Arthur Schomburg, “The Negro Digs Up His Past” (1925)

Related Works: Alain Locke, “Contents” from The New Negro (1925)
                Aaron Douglas, “Prodigal Son” (1927) and “Aspects of Negro Life” (1934)
                Winold Reiss, “Alain Locke” (1925) and “The Brown Madonna” (1925)
                Miguel Covarrubias, “Cake Walk” (1927) and “Rhapsody in Blue” (1927)

SHAME AND ITS SISTERS

Larsen associates the mentality of the black bourgeoisie with psychological states of paranoia and psychosis depicted through unstable irony and strong focalization. Critics have asked whether the work is a novel about racial passing or instead a novel about sexuality passing as a novel about race.

Reading: Nella Larsen, Passing (1929)

Related Works: Dudley Murphy, dir., Black and Tan (1929)
                Fletcher Henderson, “Sugar Foot Stomp” (1925)
                Richard Bruce Nugent, “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” (1926)
                Wallace Thurman, “Cordelia the Crude” (1926)

MIDTERM EXAM

The midterm has two parts. The first half of the exam occurs during class on March 20. It asks you to identify passages (author and title) and to explain their importance to the works in which they appear. The second half of the midterm is completed outside of class. It is open book. It asks you to compare and contrast specific works. It is submitted under “Assignments” on the course website by March 22.
MAR 20       NO CLASS

APR 1-3       MIDNIGHT ON LENOX AVENUE

Hughes stages the poet's encounter with vernacular tradition, but does not aspire to elevate folkways into fine art. He values folkways on their own terms, especially their capacity for melancholy. Short lyrics in free verse experiment with scale, dilating from street level to take in the entire world.

Reading: Langston Hughes, *The Weary Blues* (1926)

Related Works: Lucien H. White, “In the Realm of Music” (1922)
Carl Van Vechten, “Negro ‘Blues’ Singers” (1926)
George S. Schuyler, “The Negro Art-Hokum” (1926)
Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926)

APR 8-10       LISTEN HERE BLUES

Hughes abandons the framing devices from his previous volume for a conceptual art that presents folk expression without apparent mediation. The commitment to cultural authenticity is challenged unexpectedly in slice-of-life poems that pose unresolved ethical problems for detached observers.

Reading: Langston Hughes, *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927)

Related Works: Bessie Smith, “St. Louis Blues” (1925) and “Backwater Blues” (1927)
William Kelley, “Langston Hughes: The Sewer Dweller” (1927)
Langston Hughes, “Christ in Alabama” (1931 and 1967)
Sterling Brown, “Odyssey of Big Boy” (1927)

APR 12       ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Your annotated bibliography should include at least six entries followed by three to four sentences, summarizing the work and evaluating its potential relevance to your research. A description of this assignment appears above under “Essays.” Bibliographies are submitted electronically on the website.

APR 15-17       ZORA
Hurston narrates the struggle for personal autonomy by leavening dialect with figurative language and elaborating characterization in free indirect discourse. An anthropologist, Hurston addresses the problem of participant observation in a marriage plot in which the suitor is also a native informant.

Reading: Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)

Zora Neale Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934)
Zora Neale Hurston, “Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals” (1934)
Franz Boas, “The Problem of Race” (1929)

**APR 22-24 BROODING**

Wright poses an alternative to Hurston, rejecting assumptions about the positive value of folk culture associated with the Harlem Renaissance, assumptions that underestimate racism's power to destroy the consciousness of its victims. Wright overcomes these circumstances by engaging the imagination.

Reading: Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (1945)

Related Works: Zora Neale Hurston, “Stories of Conflict” (1938)
Richard Wright, “Between Laughter and Tears” (1937)
Richard Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937)
E. Franklin Frazier, “In the City of Destruction” (1939)

**APR 26 ESSAY PROPOSAL**

Your essay proposal includes a question, reasonable responses to the question, draft introduction, and catalogue of evidence. A complete description of this assignment appears above under “Essays.” Essay proposals are submitted electronically by under “Assignments” on the course website.

**APR 29-MAY 1 WRITING WORKSHOPS**

We will be discussing a few essay proposals. We will think together about how they demonstrate representative challenges involved in writing about works of literature. We will also take the time to address the particular claims made in the proposals—applauding strengths, asking for clarification, suggesting alternative evidence, and raising objections in order to advance the writing process.

**MAY 3 CLOSE READING**
Your close reading includes a passage relevant to your essay question, a detailed description, an acknowledgement and response, and a draft explication. A complete description of this assignment appears above under “Essays.” Essay proposals are submitted electronically on the course website.

**MAY 13**  
**FINAL ESSAY**

Essays are 10-12 pages, double spaced, plus notes and/or bibliography formatted according to your preferred system. Essays are submitted electronically on the course website before May 13.

**MAY 15**  
**FINAL EXAM**

This is a take-home, open-book, open-notes exam. It asks you to respond to two broad questions about African American literary history. It is submitted on the course website by May 15.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Fisk University Jubilee Singers, “Steal Away to Jesus,” Columbia W141524, 1926.


Dudley Murphy, dir., Black and Tan (Los Angeles: RKO Radio Pictures, 1929).


Jean Toomer, Cane (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1923).


Lucien White, “In the Realm of Music,” New York Age (8 July 1922), 5.


