

Bad English: Aesthetics of Non-Standard Language in the African Diaspora

Instructor: William Martin

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Tutorial Description: What makes a language “bad”? Syntax? Pronunciation? Connotation? The identity of the one using it? This course explores how members of the African diaspora tangle with the contradictions and complications of Standard English. How does a black writer’s own language impede literary production? How do black writers resolve the anxieties surrounding representations of the vernacular? What experimental, alternative, and hybrid forms of English do black writers generate? A focus on literature from the African American and Caribbean tradition will spearhead an examination of how these writers have engaged, experimented, and explored the English language to advance their aesthetic or socio-political concerns. Theoretical frames such as African American Cultural Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and Gender Studies function as helpful tools for investigating our intellectual inquiries. Our class will evaluate the artistic merit of non-Standard English in literature, its perpetuation and protest of anti-black stereotypes, and its paradoxical role in both culturally nationalistic and syncretistic discourses. We will also think about the utility of non-standard English in literature for black people in the United States and the Caribbean, how history and politics influence the style and stories involving non-Standard English, and how the reception of non-Standard English has transformed over time. Writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Franz Fanon, James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, Gayl Jones, NourbeSe Philip, and others will be pivotal as we think through these pertinent questions. This course positions dialect, creole, African American Vernacular English and its other subsets as both strategy and style—aesthetics and activism.

Tutorial Goals:

In this course, we will:

- Distinguish among the multiplicity of non-Standard Englishes and define them
- Assess how literary forms foster or fetter the possibilities of non-Standard English
- Track the debates surrounding non-Standard English throughout the twentieth century
- Draw connections between the African American and Caribbean literary traditions
- Give a condensed presentation of a larger research project
- Develop a critical vocabulary for discussing literary and linguistic matters

Research/Writing Goals:

- Compose a 20-25 page research paper
- Conduct archival research through a physical collection or online database
- Evaluate and respond to secondary sources in literary studies
- Produce a prospectus and annotated biography
- Improve ability to craft a cogent and insightful literary analysis

Assignments and Breakdown

Course Dictionary (5%): Please record and define any new and/or central terminology you encounter in your reading. We will discuss your weekly selections in class. New vocabulary for the week will be due on Canvas before our class meeting.

Attendance/Participation (10%): Please arrive to class equipped with questions, criticisms, curiosities, and insights. Egregious lateness will negatively impact your grade.

Short Paper (10%): Due week 5, please complete a 5-page literary analysis of one text from our syllabus.

Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography (10%): Due week 8, please submit a one-page prospectus detailing the topic of your final research paper, how you plan to conduct your research, how your paper contributes to the conversations surrounding your topic, and the key terms that your argument will engage with. Please also submit an annotated bibliography with at least ten sources. Include a summary of your source and how you plan to incorporate it into your argument.

Junior Essay Draft (10%): Due Week 10, 20-25 pages.

Junior Essay Topic Presentation (15%): Due in class Week 13, please give a 15-20 minute presentation of your Junior Tutorial Essay Topic.

Junior Essay (40%): Your final research paper 20-25 pages in length.

Schedule

UNIT 1: ESCAPING THE SHADOW OF MINSTRELSY

Week 1: Majors and Minors, Origins of a Representational Fracture

Primary: Selections from Paul Laurence Dunbar, *Lyrics of a Lowly Life*

Secondary: Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Dis and Dat: Dialect and The Descent”; Gavin Jones, “Contaminated Tongues: American Philology and The Problem of Dialect”

Week 2: Dialect, Dialectics, and Dichotomies

Primary: Charles Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman*

Secondary: Glenda Carpio, “‘Laffin’ fit ter kill’: Black Humor in the Fiction of William Wells Brown and Charles W. Chesnutt”; Lisa Minnick, “A Brief History of American Literary Dialect”

Week 3: Rad and Raunchy, McKay’s Sensationalist and Squalid Style

Primary: Claude McKay, *Banjo*

Secondary: Brent Edwards, “Vagabond Internationalism: Claude McKay’s *Banjo*”; Paul Gilroy, “Jewels Brought from Bondage”: Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity”

Week 4: Free-Indirect Discourse and a Collective non-Standard English

Primary: Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Secondary: Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Zora Neale Hurston and the Speakerly Text”; Richard Wright, “Between Laughter and Tears”; Zora Neale Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression”

UNIT 2: INTO THE METROPOLE

Week 5: Caribbean Soundscapes in the Urban Landscape

Primary: Samuel Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*

Secondary: Aime Cesaire, “Discourse on Colonialism”; Franz Fanon, “The Negro and Language”

****Library Visit****

****Short Paper Due****

Week 6: Remixing English, Dub Poetry and its Dynamics

Primary: Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Mi Revalueshanary Fren*

Secondary: Morris, “Is English we speaking”; Brathwaite, “History of the Voice”

UNIT 3: VOICES OF THE INTERNATIONAL ‘BLACK OMAN’

Week 7: Patois Poetics of the Mother Tongue

Primary: Selections from Louise Bennett

Secondary: Morris, “On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously”; Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism”

Week 8: Musings on Polyvocality

Primary: NourbeSe Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue*

Secondary: Mahlis, “A Poet of Place: An Interview with M. NourbeSe Philip”; Ramazani, “The Hybrid Muse. Postcolonial Poetry in English”

****Prospectus and Bibliography Due****

Week 9: A Black Dialogic, The African American Vernacular English Novel

Primary: Gayl Jones, *Corregidora*

Secondary: Baldwin, “If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?”; Jordan, “Nobody Mean More to Me than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan”; Dillard, “A Sketch of the History of Black English”

Week 10: Linguistic Syncretism in the U.S. South

Primary: Julie Dash, *Daughters of the Dust*

Secondary: Turner, “Backgrounds” from *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*; Mufwene, “What do Creoles and Pidgins tell us about the Evolution of Language?” from *Language Evolution: Contact, Competition and Change*

****Guest Speaker****

****Junior Essay Draft Due****

UNIT 4: NON-STANDARD ENGLISH AND THE LITERARY AVANT-GARDE

Week 11: In Defense of a Black Rhythm

Primary: Kamau Brathwaite, *The Arrivants*

Secondary: Walmsley, “A Sense of Community: Kamau Brathwaite and the Caribbean Artists Movement”; Brathwaite, “The Caribbean Artist Movement”

Week 12: In Defense of a Black Syntax

Primary: Selections from the Black Arts Movement Poetry (Baraka, Sanchez, Toure, Neal, Giovanni, etc.)

Secondary: Rodgers, “Black poetry – where it’s at”; Neal, “The Black Arts Movement”; Webster Fabio, “Tripping with Black Writing”

Week 13: Class Presentations of Junior Essay Topic and Tutorial Celebration

Course Policies

Inclusion: The classroom is a space of intellectual exchange and expansion. It is crucial that we prioritize listening and speaking with intent. Let’s aim to have our claims substantiated with textual evidence. In times of doubt, there is no harm in asking questions. Let’s approach difficult subject matter with the objective of seeking understanding first, and then enlightenment second. We will learn as much from each other as from the course materials. Our various identities and shared time in the classroom should always be respected.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities: “Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the Disability Access Office (DAO), formerly the Accessible Education Office (AEO), and speak with their seminar leader by the end of the second week of the term. Failure to do so may result in the Course Head’s inability to respond in a timely manner.”

Academic Honesty: Let's remain honest with ourselves and each other. Please bring your unique questions, curiosities, and insights to the classroom. Ideas that stem from external sources must be properly cited, recognized, and acknowledged. Let's aspire to be ethical scholars. As Harvard's Honor statement asserts: "Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one's own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs."

Attendance: I will account for attendance in lecture and section. I am trusting you with one absence from class without penalty. You do not need to send excuses for this "freebie" absence—no need to ask me or provide a reason in advance or after the fact. It is meant to cover everything: medical issues, emergencies, religious holidays, family or friend crises, extracurricular travel, etc. Please note that, beyond this allowance, egregious lateness or frequent absences will affect your participation grade, and may affect your final grade.

Extensions and Late Assignments: All writing assignments must be in Word.doc format, in Times 12pt font, double-spaced, with one-inch margins, and submitted by midnight on the deadline. Three-day extensions will be granted with one week's advance request. Otherwise, each late day is a half step down in your grade, e.g. A- to B+. No extensions will be granted for the final paper as it is a deadline set by the English department.