ENG 360: African American Writers:
The Politics and Poetics of Black Dialect Use in American Literature

Course Description: The official title of this course, “African American Writers,” is misleading, because we are going to be investigating a much more specific topic, namely the use of African American dialect in American literature. This means that we are going to be reading some white writers of the so-called Plantation Tradition, who specialized in using Black dialect (Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mark Twain, Thomas Nelson Page, Joel Chandler Harris). Our discussions of these 19th century white writers will prepare us to address the central problematic of the course: what is the significance of Black dialect use in writing by African Americans who inherited the Plantation Tradition, but who had little or no interest in perpetuating its values? Can Black dialect operate as something other than a sign of racial and intellectual inferiority, or is this idiom always a way of placing its users at the bottom of a cultural hierarchy? How have Black intellectuals of the 19th and 20th centuries debated these questions, and how have their attitudes about the politics and poetics of Black dialect given shape to an African American literary tradition?

These questions continue to dominate critical discussions about African American art and culture, as we will discover when we view and discuss Spike Lee’s provocative and problematic film, Bamboozled during week 7. Most of the course will be focused on fiction and poetry, however, and I must insist that you come to class with the assigned readings completed beforehand. If it becomes necessary for me to give unannounced reading quizzes, I won’t hesitate to do so.

Papers, Exams, Grading: There will be two assigned papers in the course, a five page paper due on Thursday, April 26th, and a 7 page paper due on Thursday, June 7th. There will also be a final exam at 8:00 am Wednesday, June 13th. The first paper and the final exam will each be worth 25% of the final grade. The second paper will be worth 40%. Class participation will be worth another 10%, which means that students who make no effort to participate in class discussion or during office hours can earn no more than an A- for the term. All written material must be typed, double-spaced, thoroughly proofread, and printed.

Plagiarism: Students who hand in written material that is not their own will receive an F for the course, and a report will be submitted to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs to determine if additional penalties should be imposed.

Required Readings: Books are available at the University Bookstore. Other editions of the required texts are acceptable, but you will have some difficulty following class discussion, which will be keyed to the following editions:

- Mark Twain, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (New Riverside Editions, Houghton Mifflin)
- Charles W. Chesnutt, Selected Writings (New Riverside Editions, Houghton Mifflin)
- Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God (Harper Modern Classic)

Other required readings, listed on the schedule below, are posted on Blackboard.

Recommended Texts: I had originally intended to assign the following titles as well, but time restrictions and other priorities intervened. They are available at the University Bookstore and are worth your attention. Anyone who wants to read these as part of an independent study project or as an alternative paper topic is welcome discuss plans with me. Everyone is invited to purchase them for future reading.

- James Weldon Johnson, Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (Hill and Wang)
- Toni Morrison, Song of Solomon (Plume)
Schedule of Assigned Readings

Week 1
Tuesday: Paul Laurence Dunbar, selected poems (Blackboard)
Thursday: Dunbar, selected poems (Blackboard)

Week 2
Tuesday: Harriet Beecher Stowe, passages from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Blackboard)
        Thomas Nelson Page, “Marse Chan” (Blackboard)
        Joel Chandler Harris, “Uncle Remus and the Tar Baby” (Blackboard)
        Mark Twain, “A True Story” (Blackboard)
        Alexander Crummell, “Mastering the Master’s Tongue” (Blackboard)

Thursday: Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
        Shelley Fisher Fishkin, from *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African American Voices* (in the Riverside edition)

Week 3
Tuesday: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
        “Corn-Pone Opinions” (in the Riverside Edition)

Thursday: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Week 4
Tuesday: Charles W. Chesnutt, “The Goophered Grapevine,” “Po’ Sandy,”
Thursday: “Mars Jeems’s Nightmare,” “Superstitions and Folklore of the South” (in the Riverside Edition)

Paper Due in Class (5 pages)

Week 5
Thursday: “Sis’ Becky’s Pickaninny,” “The Future American” (in the Riverside Edition)

Week 6
Tuesday: “Dave’s Neckliss,” “The Wife of his Youth”
Thursday: “Her Virginia Mammy,” “Baxter’s Procrustes”

Week 7
Tuesday: Spike Lee, *Bamboozled*, screening and discussion
Thursday: *Bamboozled*, screening and discussion

Week 8
Tuesday: Booker T. Washington, “Atlanta Exposition Address” (Blackboard)
    W.E.B. DuBois, selections from The Souls of Black Folk (Blackboard)
    Alexander Crummell, “The Attitude of the American Mind Toward the Negro Intellect”
    (Blackboard)
Thursday: Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God

**Week 9**
Tuesday: Their Eyes Were Watching God
Thursday: Their Eyes Were Watching God

**Week 10**
Tuesday: Sterling Brown, selected poems (Blackboard)
Thursday: Sterling Brown, selected poems (Blackboard)
**Paper Due in Class (7 pages)**

**FINAL EXAM: 8:00 AM, Wednesday, June 13th in 204 Chapman**