

## **English 402: Black Writers and the Wild West 3:30-5:55 Thursday/Roberts 209B**

Dr. Michael K. Johnson  
Office Hours: MWF, 10:00-11:00; Thursday, 2:30-3:30  
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### **Required Texts**

Deirdre Mullane (editor), *Crossing the Danger Water*  
Pearl Cleage, *Flyin' West*  
Taylor Gordon, *Born to Be*  
Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*  
Pauline Hopkins, *Winona: A Tale of Negro Life in the South and Southwest* (collected in *The Magazine Novels of Pauline Hopkins*)  
Nat Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*  
Oscar Micheaux, *The Homesteader*  
Toni Morrison, *Paradise*  
Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*  
Owen Wister, *The Virginian*

### **Course Description**

This course will examine the work of African American writers who have documented the experience of black migration westward or who have used that experience as source material for fiction and drama. As the idea of "the West" in the American imagination involves both mythic construction and geographic reality, we will read two types of stories by black writers. One type adapts the mythology of the West by revising the conventions of "the western" so as to recreate the genre in a form that better expresses black experience. The other type (primarily autobiographical) more realistically portrays black westward migration. Myth and reality, however, often mingle in works about the American West. All the books we will read foreground debates about the roles men and women should play in society, and we will examine the often complex interplay of race and gender as articulated in these books. In the American imagination, the West is the place where "a man's a man and a woman's a woman," although, as we will see, few writers will agree on what "being a man" or "being a woman" means.

*Grades:* Grades will be determined primarily by your performance on one short (3-4 page) paper and one longer research project (12-15 pages). The final research paper will account for 60% of your final course grade, the short paper for 20%. Such factors as attendance, participation, and performance on in-class presentations will contribute to the final 20% of the course grade.

*Presentations:* Each student will be responsible for two presentations to the class during the course of the semester. The first presentation (approximately 15 minutes) will involve summarizing an important article related to that day's reading assignment. This will be a collaborative presentation by two students (except for one lucky group that will consist of three

people who will make a 20-25 minute presentation). The second presentation (again, 15 minutes) will involve a report on each student's work-in-progress: the final research project due at the end of the semester. Each individual will present an overview of his or her project to the class.

*Attendance:* Excessive absences, excused or unexcused, will damage your course grade, and I reserve the right to substantially lower any person's semester grade if that person has more than three unexcused absences. A legitimate emergency or verifiable illness will be considered excused, but only if you provide me with documentation. I will not ask you for such documentation; it is your responsibility to provide it.

Please note that any student who needs accommodations in this course because of a disability should notify me at the beginning of the semester so that arrangements can be made.

## ENGLISH 402 PRELIMINARY SYLLABUS

January 18

Introduction

January 25

Selections from *Crossing the Danger Water*: the Dred Scott case, 132-138; Frederick Douglass, 139-150; Harriet Jacobs, 163-167; Sojourner Truth, 184-88; about John Brown, 207-213; Civil War and Reconstruction, 293-307, 317-327; Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois (354-92); the Great Migration, 455-59; Claude McKay, 467; Countee Cullen, 517-520

February 1

Nat Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love, Better Known in the Cattle Country as "Deadwood Dick"* (1907)

February 8

Owen Wister, *The Virginian* (1902)

**Presentation:** selections from Lee Clark Mitchell's *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (1996)

February 15

Pauline Hopkins, *Winona: A Tale of Negro Life in the South and Southwest* (1902); selections from *Crossing the Danger Water*: Ida Wells-Barnett, Mary Church Terrell, and Anna Julia Cooper, 393-420.

**Presentation:** Martha H. Patterson's "'kin o' rough jestic fer a parson': Pauline Hopkins's *Winona* and the Politics of Reconstructing History" (1998)

February 22 (break)

March 1

Pearl Cleage, *Flyin' West* (1995); from *Crossing the Danger Water*: Zora Neale Hurston, 524-533; **draft due for workshop on essay #1**

March 8

**Essay #1 due;** Oscar Micheaux, *The Homesteader* (1917)

**Presentation:** selections from Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence's *Writing Himself Into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audience* (2000)

March 15

Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter* (1946)

**Presentation:** Joanne M. Braxton's "Motherless Daughters and Quest for a Place," from *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition* (1989)

March 22

Taylor Gordon, *Born to Be* (1929); selections from *Crossing the Danger Water*: Alain Locke and Claude McKay, 471-493; Langston Hughes, 499-502.

**Presentation:** Robert Hemenway's introduction to the 1975 edition of *Born to Be*

March 29

Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (1998); selections from *Crossing the Danger Water*: Alice Walker, 719-731

**Presentation:** Michael Awkward's "'Unruly and Let Loose': Myth, Ideology, and Gender in *Song of Solomon*" from *Negotiating Difference* (1995)

April 5

Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945); selections from *Crossing the Danger Water*: Joe Louis and Sterling Brown, 538-545; Eldridge Cleaver, 670-679;  
**abstract and bibliography for final paper due**

**Presentation:** Gary Storhoff's "Slaying the Fathers: The Autobiography of Chester Himes" (1996)

April 12

Movie: TBA

April 19 (break)

April 26

**Presentations on Final Projects**

May 3

**Presentations on Final Projects**

**Friday, May 11, Final Project Due**