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## *ENGL 476. Studies in (Contemporary) Southern Literature: The Past, the Present, and the Postmodern*

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University of Mississippi, Fall 2010  
Hume 200  
TTh 1-2:15  
Dr. Leigh Anne Duck

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### COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will focus on contemporary representations of the U.S. South in fiction and nonfiction; we will also read a bit of literary criticism and theory. Situating literature in relation to an era marked by mass media, mass markets, and ever-intensifying globalization, we will examine how writers respond, in both form and theme, to these social changes; we will further consider what happens to the concept of regional culture in such circumstances. We will explore the meaning of the term "postmodern," the challenges of representing history for readers increasingly skeptical of authoritative narratives, the ways in which understandings of identity and ethics may be changing, and how writers from other nations configure the region. This course will be run as a seminar: students will participate actively in class discussion and also collaborate outside the classroom.

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### OUTCOMES

By the end of the semester, students should have:

- A substantial understanding of the concept "postmodernism" and how it can be applied to literary representations of the South,
- A substantial understanding of issues, themes, and styles distinctive to the contemporary era of southern literary prose,
- Greater understanding of the ethical and political concerns raised in and by aesthetic representations,
- Greater facility in collaborating to clarify critical concepts,
- Greater facility in forming and expressing critical judgments,
- Expanded ability to use theory and criticism in developing and supporting conclusions,
- Greater clarity, precision, and creativity in developing and expressing oral and written arguments.

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### REQUIRED TEXTS—available at University Bookstore

- V. S. Naipaul, *A Turn in the South* (1989)
- Josephine Humphreys, *Rich in Love* (1987)
- Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972)
- Barry Hannah, *Ray* (1980)
- Alice Walker, *Meridian* (1976)
- Lewis Nordan, *Wolf Whistle* (1993)
- Ellen Douglas, *Truth: Four Stories I Am Finally Old Enough to Tell* (1998)
- Zakes Mda, *Cion* (2007)

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### POLICIES

- You are expected to uphold the University Creed (<http://www.olemiss.edu/info/creed.html>), particularly its clauses on civility, integrity, academic honesty, and academic freedom. Our reading presents some unsettling images as well as controversial topics, and you are encouraged to express your concerns and

opinions about this material. Please remember that other members of the class share this right.

Discussions—whether virtual or in the classroom—should be conducted both candidly and in a manner that demonstrates respect for every participant.

- While in class, you are expected to attend to and participate in discussion; you are **NOT** allowed to engage in private conversation, “packing up” your belongings before class ends, or other behaviors that would disrupt class activities. Turn off your phones before class!
- The University of Mississippi does not allow food and drink in classrooms.
- Bring the relevant text to *every* meeting of class!
- It is University policy to provide, on a flexible and individual basis, reasonable classroom accommodations to students who have verified disabilities that may affect their ability to participate in course activities or meet course requirements. Students with disabilities are encouraged to contact their instructors to discuss their individual needs for accommodations.

## GRADING

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- A total of more than four absences will lower your final grade by a minimum of .5 (on a 4-pt. scale) per class missed. Seven or more absences will result in a failing grade for the semester. Repeated tardiness or early departure will be recorded as absence. Please note that this policy does not distinguish between “excused” and “unexcused” absences: you are strongly advised to reserve your allotted absences for occasions, such as illness or family emergency, when you need them. Please note that you are responsible for keeping track of your absences.
- Your course grade will be determined by a weighted average:
  - Postings on primary texts: 25%
  - Postings on critical/theoretical texts: 10% (5% each)
  - First essay: 15%
  - Presentation: 10%
  - Final essay and preliminary documents: 25%
  - Class participation: 15%
- You must complete all assigned work to pass this class.
- Plagiarism, in any assignment, will result in a substantial penalty if detected. In most cases, students will be assigned a failing grade for that aspect of the course in which they have plagiarized and, in many cases, they will receive an F for the entire course. (See university [policy](#). The university also offers an instructional [video](#) providing a detailed description of plagiarism and ways to avoid it.) Success in this course requires not only academic integrity (the willingness and determination to do your own work) but also an understanding of how to use and identify scholarly resources properly. If you have, at any time, questions regarding plagiarism or the appropriate use of sources, ask the professor.

## POSTINGS ON PRIMARY TEXTS

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### Requirements:

- For every book we read, students should initiate one 150-300 word posting in the Blackboard discussion forum devoted to that text.
- No posting may comprise more than 300 words.
- All postings must be thoughtful: they should respond to or reflect on—not merely summarize—the reading. You may, for instance, describe some aspect of the text—its tone, plot, characterization, etc.—but if you choose this route, you should provide the reader some context for your description: why does the tone, plot, or characterization *matter* in your experience of the text? What, for instance, makes this aspect of the text striking, confusing, upsetting, or enjoyable?
- Initial postings must be clearly titled in a way that sets productive expectations among your readers. If, for instance, you want to rant about Barry Hannah's or Alice Walker's representations of gender,

your subject line should include the words "rant" and "representation of gender." If, on the other hand, you want to figure out why these authors are using fragmentation in the way they do, you might use the phrase "considering fragmentation of narrative " in your subject line. Titling appropriately will help readers select and respond to the posts that are most useful for them; thus, it is required.

**Objectives:**

- To demonstrate that you have read course materials promptly and attentively,
- To convey your independent questions, frustrations, insights and observations regarding the reading,
- To prepare for a simultaneously more focused and student-driven class discussion, and
- To practice engaging with peers using an electronic, textual medium.

**Assessment:**

- Postings will be graded not on accuracy, but on thoughtfulness. In these discussion boards, you are expected to respond to the text before you fully comprehend it; for many of these works, comprehension is an almost inherently experimental process, requiring you to form and refine or even reject initial hypotheses. Though we are aiming to develop sound conclusions through the course of discussion, you should feel free to share ideas that—though they seem viable in your first encounter with the text—you recognize as somewhat tenuous.
- Postings should, however, pay due attention to the text. Though you are welcome to make broader claims than you could support in 300 words, you should at least illustrate your claim with an example from the text. Page numbers should be documented.
- You are welcome and even encouraged to refer to external sources in these postings, but you should provide identifying information for these sources. This documentation can be formatted informally, however, and if the source is readily available online, you may simply link to it. External references are not necessary for an A, but they may help you think about a way to begin commenting on the text. (They may also, on occasion, provide the kind of edge that yields an A+.)
- Your prose in these postings need not be as formal as in essays, but it should be clear and professional.
- To receive an A, a post must be clear, thoughtful, usefully titled, attentive to the text, critically informed; the author must also follow-up with thoughtful, clear, and documented (where necessary) responses to classmates. Also, to receive an A, a student must make at least one posting before the first class regarding a text. (In the case of our first text, Naipaul's *A Turn in the South*, the second class will do.) Postings initiated after class discussion of a text has concluded will earn a D at best.

## POSTINGS ON CRITICISM OF CONTEMPORARY SOUTHERN LITERATURE (THE "POSTSOUTH")

**Requirements:**

- A number of books concerning contemporary southern literature will be on reserve at J.D. Williams Library by Friday, August 28; a list will be available on Blackboard ("Course Documents"). Choose one of these books, and report on at least two chapters: summarize the argument, and briefly consider how it might be useful in helping readers understand the literature for our course. Your initial posting should not exceed 500 words.
- Because these postings are longer, and will require more formatting, you are encouraged to submit your initial report as an *attachment* to a posting within the "'Postsouth' criticism" forum. You may, however, choose to use the formatting options within Blackboard, which is fine.
- All postings should be titled in a way helpful to readers selecting posts to read.
- Begin your assignment with a bibliographic citation of the article, using MLA or Chicago style, and be sure to indicate which sections of the book you are discussing. (Guidelines for how to format such

citations are readily accessible, and this aspect of your paper will be graded. Do not, for instance, format a citation as JSTOR does.)

- Students must respond to at least two of their classmates' postings; these postings should be significantly shorter.
  - You are advised to take this opportunity to look for criticism that might help you in developing your first or final essay. Your classmates are each developing expertise on diverse critics' work, and you should feel free to ask whether the volumes they describe include information on a topic not covered in the report, whether the overall approach seems potentially useful in relation to a particular text, etc. You are, of course, also welcome to ask for clarification concerning the original post.
  - Students are required to answer questions about their initial postings
- Initial postings must be submitted by the due date; late postings will lose one grade point for each day past the deadline. Response postings should be finished within a week of the initial due date.

**Objectives:**

- To collaborate in compiling knowledge of how scholars in the field describe contemporary southern literature
- To practice summarizing and assessing critical arguments,
- To review rules for citation and documentation,
- To prepare for subsequent essays.

**Assessment:**

- The primary criterion for this assignment is "user-friendliness": postings, questions, and responses will be graded on how effectively they help to convey knowledge of a critical work and its potential usefulness for participants in this course. To achieve this goal, writers should focus on clarity, thoroughness, and aptness of documentation.
- Please be aware that summary is not as easy as it sounds. Think carefully about how much information your reader will need in order to understand the critical work's purpose(s), conclusion(s), and method(s) of proving its case..
- All things being equal, students will be rewarded for adventurousness: some of these works are more challenging than others, and if you can find a way to make one of the more complex texts speak to your readers, you will receive credit for your effort.

## POSTINGS ON THEORIES OF POSTMODERNITY AND POSTMODERNISM

**Requirements:**

- A number of works concerning postmodernity and postmodernism will be available through Blackboard and on reserve at J.D. Williams Library by Friday, August 28; a list will be posted on Blackboard ("Course Documents"). Choose one essay or one chapter from a book, and summarize the argument, briefly considering how it might be useful in helping readers understand the literature for our course. Your initial posting should not exceed 500 words.
- Other requirements for this forum are identical to those for the "Postsouth criticism" forum.

**Objectives:**

- To collaborate in compiling understanding of the concept "postmodernism,"
- To practice summarizing and assessing theoretical arguments,
- To prepare for subsequent essays.

**Assessment:**

- The criteria for this forum are identical to those for the "Postsouth criticism" forum, with two caveats:
  - Theories of postmodernism are notoriously abstruse; accordingly, clear and direct prose is especially crucial for this task.

- References to the U.S. South have not featured prominently in theories of postmodernism; nor are the latter regularly referenced in criticism on southern literature. Your ability to assess the relevance of the theory you read to our course material will be especially significant.

## ESSAYS—GENERAL

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- Each paper must be typed, titled and double-spaced in a standard 12-pt. font. Margins should not exceed one inch. All papers must include author's name and working email address in the heading.
- Submit papers via Blackboard's "Digital Dropbox."
- All sources must be documented using MLA or Chicago style.
- Papers will be graded according to their success in fulfilling the particular objectives of each assignment, but grades will also reflect
  - clarity of argument and expression,
  - professionalism and verve of prose style,
  - coherence of argumentative structure,
  - use of textual evidence to support a claim, and
  - acuity of insight.

## ESSAY ONE

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**Due:** October 15

You may have a one-week extension for the first essay if you ask by the due date. No excuses are necessary, *but* the extension only lasts for one week. After that, your grade drops by one point (on an A-F scale) per day.

**Length:** approximately 5 pages

**Topic:** Using one or two works from "postsouthern" literary criticism and/or postmodern theory, show how such analytic models can illuminate one of the primary texts in our course.

**Skills Assessed:**

- Understanding of "postsouthern" literary criticism and theories of postmodernism
- Ability to use theoretical and critical models in interpreting literary texts
- Ability to situate individual understanding of a literary work in relation to a broader scholarly conversation.

**Tips:** Please note that this paper, in which you apply theoretical or critical models to a literary text, constitutes a distinct analytic genre; you should aim for a more innovative or distinctive approach in your final paper. For the purposes of this essay, you may demonstrate creativity through the amount of meaning you can educe from the details or formal qualities of the literary text, as well as the kind of relationship you ultimately posit between literature and theory/criticism. Ideally, you would not simply apply the latter to the primary text, but would also use the literature to help complicate or clarify the critical or theoretical model with which you begin.

## PRESENTATIONS

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**Length:** 8-10 minutes

**Locale:** Mac teaching lab, Weir 104

Students may prepare for projection of presentation or may guide students to created website.

**Topic:** Overview of your research paper. The presentation should clearly and concisely describe:

- The problem/question you have chosen to investigate,
- Your critical methodology, which you may demonstrate through analysis of a brief passage or image, and
- Your preliminary conclusions

**Objectives:**

- To share research through oral and visual or multi-media presentation,
- To convey the significance or purpose of your project to an audience of peers,
- To organize and articulate your analysis in an audience-friendly manner,
- To provide questions and feedback for classmates' presentations, and
- To contemplate the relationship between the formats of essay and presentation.

**Assessment:**

- Vigor and insight of analysis,
- Clarity and organization (including timing) of content,
- Style (use of media, consideration of audience, response to questions, etc.), and
- Engagement as both presenter and audience member.

**Schedule:**

- Presentation schedules will be arranged through a combination of volunteerism and lottery.
- Though attendance and participation are vital for these sessions, we will divide into groups so that you are not required to attend all 6 hours of presentations.

**FINAL ESSAY**

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**Due:** December 6

I have very little leeway here, as I have many exams to grade and am constrained by the registrar's deadline for semester grades. Students concerned about their ability to meet this deadline should consult with me as soon as they begin to suspect a problem.

**Length:** 8-10 pages

**Topic:** You will develop your own topics for this final paper, but you must consult with me during that process. You must engage with some of the themes and theoretical models of this course, but you may choose to focus on another work of literature, or even work from another medium (such as film, music, or artistic display). Whatever your focus, you must make a clear, well-supported argument, and you must engage in research.

**Skills Assessed:**

- Critical autonomy and creativity
- Ability to synthesize and mobilize knowledge and/or perspectives encountered over the course of the semester

**Prospectus:** Students must meet with the professor on or before November 16 to discuss their paper and presentation. At or before that meeting, you must prepare a prospectus that provides the following material:

- At least ½ page describing the line of investigation that you plan to pursue. You need to articulate your research question clearly, and explain how you will approach that question. The extent to which I can helpfully advise you in developing your paper will depend on the quality and quantity of information you provide me here.
- At least ¼ page describing your plans for your presentation. What format will you use? What images or examples will provide good examples? Planning for your presentation and your paper should complement each other.
- A preliminary bibliography of at least 5 sources, briefly describing how and/or why each will be useful.

**SCHEDULE**

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**T, 8/24** Introduction**Th, 8/26** V. S Naipaul, *A Turn in the South*, pp. 3-25

- T, 8/31** Naipaul, *A Turn in the South*, pp.77-135
- Th, 9/2** Naipaul, *A Turn in the South*, pp. 155-220
- T, 9/7** Josephine Humphreys, *Rich in Love*, pp. 1-97
- Th, 9/9** Humphreys, *Rich in Love*, pp. 98-145
- T, 9/14** Humphreys, *Rich in Love*, pp. 146-end
- Th, 9/16** Alice Walker, *Meridian*, pp. 1-54
- F, 9/17** **POSTING ON "POSTSOUTH" (CRITICISM ON CONTEMPORARY SOUTHERN LITERATURE) DUE**
- T, 9/21** Walker, *Meridian*, pp. 55-199
- Th, 9/23** Walker, *Meridian*, pp. 200-end
- T, 9/28** Barry Hannah, *Ray*, chaps. I-XVI
- Th, 9/30** Hannah, *Ray*, chaps. XVII-end
- F, 10/1** **POSTING ON THEORIES OF POSTMODERNISM DUE**
- T, 10/5** Ellen Douglas, *Truth: Four Stories I Am Finally Old Enough to Tell*, pp. 85-164
- Th, 10/7** Douglas, *Truth*, 165-end
- T, 10/12** Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, chaps. 1-21
- Th, 10/14** Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, chaps. 22-29
- F, 10/15** **FIRST ESSAY DUE**
- T, 10/19** Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, chaps. 30-51
- Th, 10/21** Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, chaps. 52-end
- T, 10/26** Lewis Nordan, *Wolf Whistle*, chaps. 1-4
- Th, 10/28** Nordan, *Wolf Whistle*, chaps. 5-7
- T, 11/2** Nordan, *Wolf Whistle*, chaps. 8-12
- Th, 11/4** Nordan, *Wolf Whistle*, chaps. 13-14  
Zakes Mda, *Cion*, chap. 1
- T, 11/9** Mda, *Cion*, chaps. 2-4

**Th, 11/11** Mda, *Cion*, chaps. 5-7

**M, 11/15** **Appointments 9-12, 1-4**  
**PROSPECTUS DUE AT APPOINTMENT!**

**T, 11/16** Mda, *Cion*, chaps. 8-end

**Th, 11/18** **NO CLASS**

**11/22-26** **THANSGIVING BREAK**

**T, 11/30** **PRESENTATIONS, 1-4 p.m., WEIR 104**

**Th, 12/2** **PRESENTATIONS, 1-4 p.m., WEIR 104**

**M, 12/6** **FINAL PAPERS DUE**