

ENGL 285Z: Fantasy and Speculation

Location: Zoom
Schedule: Monday-Friday, January 4-15
Session 1: 12:30-2:30
Session 2: 4:00-5:00 plus 1 asynchronous hour scheduled by the student

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Office hours: By appointment

Course Description:

In this class we will read fantasy written by multi-ethnic authors in a variety of genres, mostly in the United States in the long nineteenth century (1770-1920). Our readings include texts that feature supernatural beings and events in imaginary settings – but also texts that take on well-known myths and legends, create fictional characters to participate in historical events, fold time and space to place historical characters in the midst of fictional events, or gesture toward radically different futures. This broad understanding of fantasy will challenge us to redefine its constitutive features. The choice of readings draws on the work of scholars committed to the recovery of little-known texts, especially by African American authors.

Our study will be guided by three interrelated goals: (1) to complicate our assumptions about who wrote in the speculative mode; (2) to examine the relationship between the speculative mode and the authors' aesthetic choices, (3) to interrogate the political meanings of fantasy and speculation, asking how authors harness them to dislodge narratives of progress, claim imaginative freedom, improvise better worlds, or perpetuate oppression.

The readings, arranged in loose chronological order, include fiction, poetry, and nonfiction prose by African American authors from Phillis Wheatley to Saidiya Hartman, an excerpt from the Hawaiian creation myth *Kumulipo* in the English translation by Hawai'i's last queen, and texts by canonical Anglo-American writers like Emily Dickinson and Edgar Allan Poe. The primary texts are accompanied by some scholarly articles to enrich our thinking. Assignments include a team project that proposes a taxonomy of the speculative mode.

Required Texts:

To buy:

Martin Delany, *Blake, or the Huts of America*, ed. Jerome McGann
Honorée Fanonne Jeffers, *The Age of Phillis*

Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*

Edgar Allan Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*

Other:

The remaining texts listed in the course schedule will be provided in PDF or via links to scholarly articles, digitized copies of out-of-copyright books, and modern online editions of primary texts. Whenever possible, the syllabus provides links rather than PDFs because downloading the materials and locating relevant sections are part of the learning experience, and because the number of article downloads or visits to a project website serves as a measure of impact. This is important for the authors themselves, as well as for libraries and other organizations providing the materials in understanding what materials students need.

The readings listed below should be completed before January session begins and revisited before class:

Brooks, "Palace of the Gnomes" from *Zophiel*

Delany, *Blake, or the Huts of America* (skim Part I, read Part II in detail)

Dickinson, poems

Du Bois, "The Comet," "The Princess Steel"

Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts"

Jeffers, *The Age of Phillis*

Kumulipo excerpt

Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*

"Theresa, A Hayitian Tale"

Watkins Harper, poems

Wheatley, poems

Whitfield, "The Vision"

Wilson, "Afric-American Picture Gallery"

The remaining readings should be completed by the class date indicated.

Course requirements:

Three pre-session reflection essays (15%)

Three papers of ~3-4 pages (1,000 to 1,200 words) (45%)

One team project (10%)

Two class presentations (10%)

Engaged participation (20%)

Grading mode: Student option

Grading policy: [Ungrading](#); students will give themselves a grade, accompanied by a written reflection on how they performed in the class and why they earned this grade. I reserve the right to change grades as appropriate.

Attendance policy: To be discussed during our first meeting

M 1/4: Speculation and/in Enslavement

Reflection essays due

Session 1:

- Wheatley, “Goliath of Gath,” “On Imagination,” “Niobe in Distress” (PDF)
- [Frontispiece](#) to Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*

Session 2:

- Saidiya Hartman, “[Venus in Two Acts](#)”
- Gabrielle Foreman et al. “[Writing About ‘Slavery’?](#)”
- Honorée Fanonne Jeffers, “Looking for Miss Phillis” in *The Age of Phillis*

Tu 1/5: Looking for Phillis Wheatley Peters

Session 1

- Honorée Fanonne Jeffers, *The Age of Phillis* (pp. 1-85)

Session 2

- Jeffers, *The Age of Phillis* (pp. 86-166)

W 1/6: Caribbean Speculation, Caribbean Fantasy

Session 1:

- “[Theresa, a Haytien Tale](#)” (*Just Teach One: Early African American Print*)
- C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins* ch.1 (PDF)
- Marlene Daut, “[All the Devils Are Here](#)”

Session 2:

- Maria Gowen Brooks, “Palace of Gnomes” from [Zóphiël; or, The Bride of Seven](#) (Canto Third)
- James McCune Smith, on the coral insect, from “Civilization: Its Dependence on Physical Circumstances,” [Anglo-African Magazine](#) 1859, p. 17
 - passage from “Let us toil on” to “only gifted with instinct, in the depths of the ocean”
- Edouard Glissant, from *Poetics of Relation* (PDF)

Th 1/7: Cuba’s Revolutionary Futures

Session 1:

- Martin Delany, *Blake*, Part II

Session 2:

- James Monroe Whitfield, unattributed poems in *Blake*, Part II
- Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Abolition Geography” in *Futures of Black Radicalism* (PDF)

F 1/8: James Monroe Whitfield’s Apocalypse and Millennium

Paper One due

Session 1:

- Whitfield, from [Arguments, Pro and Con, on the Call for a National Emigration Convention](#)

Session 2:

- Whitfield, “[The Vision](#)”
- Byron, “[Darkness](#)”
- Katherine McKittrick, from [Demonic Grounds](#) (pp. 1-4)

M 1/11: Radical Black Futures

Session 1:

- William J. Wilson, “[Afric-American Picture Gallery](#)” – Papers 1, 2, 3 (*Just Teach One: Early African American Print*)
- Derrick Spires, from *The Practice of Citizenship: “Reading Anglo-African Wise,” “The Critic and His Discontents”* in [Chapter 4](#) (pp. 176-89)

Session 2:

- Wilson, “[Afric-American Picture Gallery](#)” – Papers 4, 5, 6, 7

Tu 1/12: Pacific Islands: Indigenous Cosmology and Colonial Fantasy

Session 1

- Noenoe K. Silva, “Hawaiian Literature in Hawaiian,” *Oxford Handbook of Indigenous American Literature* (PDF)
- From *The Kumulipo: An Hawaiian Creation Myth – The First Era*, trans. Lili’uokalani (PDF)
- Kamehameha Schools, “[Animating the Kumulipo](#)”
- Brandy Nālani McDougall, “[Mo’okū’auhau versus Colonial Entitlement in English Translations of the Kumulipo](#),” *American Quarterly*

Session 2

- Herman Melville, from [Typee](#) (Project Gutenberg)
- Dickinson, “The Malay took the Pearl,” “Removed from Accident of Loss,” “I gave Myself to Him” (PDF)

W 1/13: White Masculinity and the Pacific Gothic

Paper Two due

Session 1

- Edgar Allan Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (Preface through Ch. 15)
- Toni Morrison, "Romancing the Shadow" in *Playing in the Dark*

Session 2

- Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (Ch. 16 through Note)

Th 1/14: Speculation in Short Form: Emily Dickinson and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

Session 1

- Dickinson, "Because I could not stop for Death," "I started Early – Took my Dog," "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died," "I've seen a Dying Eye," "A little East of Jordan," "I cannot dance upon my Toes," "I am ashamed – I hide" (PDF)
- Watkins Harper, "The Artist," "Saved by Faith," "The Bride of Death," "Free Labor," "Death of the Old Sea King," "Bury Me in a Free Land," "The Dying Christian" (PDF)

Session 2

- Watkins Harper, "The Liberty Bell"/"The Freedom Bell," "President Lincoln's Proclamation of Freedom," "Fifteenth Amendment," "The Change," "Lines to Hon. Thaddeus Stevens" (PDF)

F 1/15: W.E.B. Du Bois's Science Fiction

Session 1

- Du Bois, "The Comet," in [Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil](#); "[The Princess Steel](#)," *PMLA*
- Nisi Shawl, "[Expanded Course in the History of Black Science Fiction](#)"
- Adrienne Brown and Britt Rusert, [Introduction](#) to "The Princess Steel," *PMLA*

Session 2

Team Project due in class

- Final reflection: What is speculative literature? - in-class discussion based on team projects

Paper Three and Course Grade due on January 28