

ENG 324: THE BLUES TRADITION IN AMERICAN LITERATURE (Fall 2007)
MWF 2:30-3:45 in Carrier 119

Dr. Adam Gussow

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Office hours: Wed. 3-5 and by appointment

Course Description:

This course will explore the way in which African American (and selected white American) writers have translated the oral culture and social milieu of blues musicians into a range of literary forms: epigrams, poems, stories, novels, plays, folkloric interviews, and autobiographies. Since the blues tradition is firmly grounded in what David Oshinsky has called “the ordeal of Jim Crow justice,” we’ll devote considerable attention to the way in which adverse social conditions in the early modern South—lynching, segregation, sharecropping, and other forms of economic expropriation—are reflected, suffered, and contested by blues texts. We’ll cover a range of other themes as well: the laughing-to-keep-from-crying dialectic; the emergence of the southern juke-joint as an African American expressive space; the spread of blues music north with the help of two Great Migrations and its progressive transformation from country blues into “classic” blues, amplified Chicago blues, and postmodern blues; “signifying” as a blues-textual strategy; womanist self-assertion and the sounding of desire as paradigmatic blues modes; the emergence of a mass white blues audience in the 1960s; contemporary blues performance and blues literature as scenes of interracial contact in which the legacy of Jim Crow is dismantled and/or reinscribed.

Course objectives and learning outcomes:

After completing this course, students will have:

- *) a greatly improved knowledge base with which to contextualize and evaluate a range of blues texts, including literary works, recordings, and live performances;
- *) a more nuanced sense of the dialectical tensions at work in the blues—despair/euphoria, enslavement/freedom, tragedy/comedy, reality/fantasy—and a corresponding ability to think their way past clichés (i.e., “The blues are an expression of the black man’s pain” and “No black, no white, just the blues”);
- *) a working familiarity with the relevant critical vocabulary (e.g., blues ethos, call and response, AAB stanzaic form, disciplinary violence);
- *) an improved ability to formulate a thesis and write a short literature paper;
- *) a greater facility at presenting and defending their ideas in a classroom setting

Required texts:

W. C. Handy, *Father of the Blues* (Da Capo Press, 1991)

August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (Plume Books, 1988)

Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Perennial, 1998)

J. J. Phillips, *Mojo Hand: An Orphic Tale* (City Miner Books, 1985)

B. B. King, *Blues All Around Me* (Quill, 1999)

Louise Redd, *Playing the Bones* (Plume Books, 1997)

**coursepak (to be purchased at CopyTime in downtown Oxford)

Course requirements and grading policy:

It is your responsibility to obtain a copy of all of the course texts listed above; to read the portion of the text to be discussed on a given day; and to bring the text to class that day, prepared to participate actively in class discussion. Students who regularly fail to bring the assigned text(s) to class and/or participate in discussion will find the “class participation” portion of their final course grade diminished.

Students must complete all written elements of the course; any written element not completed and handed in will receive an F. Two such Fs will result in automatic failure in the course. There will be no make-up quizzes or exams.

Your final grade will be calculated as follows:

Paper #1:	15%
Paper #2:	20%
Midterm Exam:	20%
Final Exam:	30%
Quiz	5%
Class particip.	10%

Papers:

Two shorter (4-5 page) papers are required. Both will be standard academic essays on one or more of the course texts with topics provided by the instructor. Late papers will ONLY be accepted in class and will be marked down 5 points for each class period they are late. I will give you more specific paper assignments and guidelines roughly two weeks before each paper is due.

Exams:

There will be an in-class midterm and a final exam. Both exams will ask you to ID a selection of passages drawn from the course readings and then analyze and contextualize them. There will also, at the instructor’s discretion, be one or more quizzes. These may or may not be announced in advance and will be given at the beginning of class.

Academic honesty:

Cheating on exams and plagiarizing are extremely serious offenses and will not be tolerated. Keep in mind that plagiarism includes a range of activities, from having someone else write part or all of your assigned work to using someone else’s words or ideas—including material found on the Worldwide Web--without acknowledging the source. Students unsure about the definition of plagiarism should see either the professor or their instructor early in the semester during office hours to clarify their understanding of this term. Students engaging in any form of academic dishonesty will crucially compromise their ability to pass this course.

Attendance policy:

Regular, on-time-and-in-time attendance is expected of all students. An attendance sheet will be passed around at the beginning of class. All present students are responsible for

signing themselves in. You will be allowed a total of four (4) absences (excused or unexcused) with no negative consequences. Each successive absence will deduct five points from your final course grade. Anyone with nine or more absences will automatically fail the course. Students with borderline final grade-point averages—i.e., 89, 79, 69—and perfect attendance at term’s end will receive special consideration.

Schedule of Assignments:

ORIGINS, DEFINITIONS, AND MYTHS

Tue 8/21: course introduction.

Thu 8/23: Steven C. Tracy, *Goin’ to Cincinnati* (handout)
Kalamu ya Salaam, “The Blues Aesthetic” (handout)

Tue 8/28: Barry Lee Pearson, *Jook Right On* (“Introduction,” “Blues Talk”) (coursepak)

Thu 8/30: Pearson, *Jook Right On* (“Turn-Arounds”) (coursepak)

Tue 9/4: W. C. Handy, *Father of the Blues* (Ch. 1-7)

Thu 9/6: Handy, *Father of the Blues* (Ch. 8-14)

PAPER #1 ASSIGNED

BLUES POETICS: FORM, PORTRAITURE, POWER

Tue 9/11: Sherley Anne Williams, “The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry” (coursepak)

poems: Langston Hughes (coursepak)

Thu 9/13: poems: Hughes (cont’d), Sterling Brown, Robert Hayden (coursepak)

Tue 9/18: Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (coursepak)

poems: Wanda Coleman, Sherley Anne Williams, Eugene Redmond, Al Young (coursepak)

Thu 9/20: Larry Neal, “Black Art and Black Liberation” (coursepak)

poems: Sonia Sanchez, Etheridge Knight, Quincy Troupe, Jayne Cortez, Sterling Plumpp (coursepak)

PAPER #1 DUE

BLUESWOMEN AND THEIR MEN

Tue 9/25: August Wilson, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (Act I)

Wilson, “Preface to Three Plays” (coursepak)

Thu 9/27: Wilson, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (Act II)

Tue 10/2: **MIDTERM EXAM**

Thu 10/4: Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Ch. 1-6)

Tue 10/9: Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Ch. 7-13)
Adam Gussow, "Guns, Knives, and Buckets of Blood" (coursepak)

Thu 10/11: Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Ch. 14-20)

Tue 10/16: J. J. Phillips, *Mojo Hand* (Ch. 1-6)
Paul Oliver, "The Jinx is on Me" (coursepak)

Thu 10/18: *Mojo Hand*, cont'd

Tue 10/23: *Mojo Hand*, cont'd

**BLUES ALL AROUND MY BED: LYNCHING, DESIRE, AND THE
PROFIT MOTIVE**

Thu 10/25: B. B. King, *Blues All Around Me* (Ch. 1-8)
Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*
(coursepak)

PAPER #2 ASSIGNED

Tue 10/30: King, *Blues All Around Me* (Ch. 9-18)

Thu 11/1: King, *Blues All Around Me* (Ch. 19-26)

WHITES, BLACKS, AND BLUES

Tue 11/6: Michael Bloomfield, *Me and Big Joe* (coursepak)
Ben Caldwell, "Birth of a Blues" (coursepak)
Roland L. Freeman, "Don't Forget the Blues" (coursepak)
BeBe Moore Campbell, *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* (coursepak)

Thu 11/8: Louise Redd, *Playing the Bones*

PAPER #2 DUE

Tue 11/13: Redd, *Playing the Bones* (cont'd)

Thu 11/15: Redd, *Playing the Bones* (cont'd)

THANKSGIVING BREAK

Tue 11/27: Frank Matheis, "Guy Davis Has It All--Or Does He?"
Adam Gussow, "Whose Blues: Eight Infuriating (and Hope-Inducing) Half-
Truths About the Modern Blues Scene" (coursepak)
Blues/rap dialogues (listening assignment)

“Uncle Tom is Dead,” Guy Davis & son
“Bridging the Gap,” Olu Dara and Nas

Thu 11/29: course review

FINAL EXAM (TBA)