

*Syllabus*  
Winter 2021

**BLACK EPISTEMOLOGIES**  
**Critical Readings on the Ontological Turn**  
**University of California, Santa Barbara**  
**Department of Black Studies**  
**Dr. Jaime Amparo Alves**

**Time:** Friday, 12:00pm – 2:50 pm      **Office Hour:** Friday (3:30-4:30pm) or by appointment  
**Class Location:** [Zoom Meeting](#)      **Email:** jaimealves@ucsb.edu  
**Zoom ID:** 824 2875 4481 & Passcode: 261872      **Permanent Office:** South Hall, 3378

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

According to Christina Sharpe, the mission of Black Studies is *to defend the dead*. What does such a project entail? How do we protect the 'dead' when death itself is not registered as such within the racial calculus that renders some lives as lives lived in "the present tense of death (2018, p. 88)?" This course embraces this challenge from a perspective (the ontological turn) that highlights Black nonbeings and Humanity's incommensurability. Black expulsion from the human domain calls into question universal categories such as human rights, justice, violence, life, and death. How might we articulate a critique of Humanity -- as a visceral project of whiteness -- in a way that gives visibility to Black suffering without foreclosing possibilities to challenge Black dehumanization? The course is organized as follows: (1) first, we will identify the genealogies of the current ontological turn in Black Studies by examining key texts by Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, Hortense Spillers, and Denise Ferreira da Silva. Their conceptualization of the Human will pave the way to (2) a critical reading of the so-called Afro-pessimism/Black Optimism debate. Whereas the Afro-pessimists embrace the geo-ontological place of death as the *locus* to a radical theorization and reinvention of life, the Black optimists contend that the emphasis on the original violence of slavery may involuntarily represent the Black being as a *death-driven subject* (Moten, 2008). Instead, they maintain that one must be attentive to the politics of fugitivity – the *fugae spaces* – that have made Black life possible. We will explore productive frictions between these theoretical approaches (3) by engaging with recent groundbreaking interventions that, while challenging one of the two perspectives outlined above, tragically confirm the place of Black nonbeings in the racial project we call Humanity.

### **REQUIREMENTS**

**Synchronous/asynchronous instruction:** this is a reading-intensive graduate course. Students are expected to come prepared to class and actively participate in seminar discussions over the entire quarter. Be aware that this is a synchronous/asynchronous course. As such, a portion of your time must be dedicated to attending the seminar, facilitating discussion, reading, and writing a 500-word weekly response comment. Your weekly response paper will be shared with

all seminar participants every Thursday before midnight. With these writing exercises, I hope you will have a solid draft of your final paper by the end of the quarter.

**Basic Online Classroom Etiquette:** Disruptive behavior will not be tolerated. Make sure your camera is on, and your microphone is off (unless it is your turn to talk). Be mindful of distracting backgrounds.

### **REQUIRED TEXTS:**

Articles are available on google scholar through your institutional email. As for books, you are responsible for buying them in advance:

#### Books:

- Da Silva, Denise Ferreira. *Toward a global idea of race*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.
- Fanon, Frantz, *Black Skin, White Mask*. New York: Grove Press, 1963.
- Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Slavery and Self-Making in 19<sup>th</sup> America*, London: Oxford Press, 1997;
- King, Tiffany Lethabo. *The Black shoals: Offshore formations of Black and Native studies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019
- Shange, Savannah. *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiracism, and Schooling in San Francisco*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019
- Vargas, João H. Costa. *The denial of antiracism: Multiracial redemption and Black suffering*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018;
- Warren, Calvin. *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018
- Wilderson III, Frank B. *Red, white & black: Cinema and the structure of US antagonisms*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.
- *Recommended:* McKittrick, Katherine, ed. *Sylvia Wynter: On being human as praxis*. Duham: Duke University Press, 2015.
- *Recommended:* Sharpe, Christina. *In the wake: On blackness and being*. Duham: Duke University Press, 2016.

### **GRADE CRITERIA**

Student Presentation

(and Participation): 40%

Weekly Reading Notes: 30%

Final Conference Paper: 30%

**Student Presentation & Participation:** Each student is responsible for a 20-minute presentation in a given week. [[Presentation schedule is available here](#)] Depending on the number of participants, you may be required to present twice. Presentations should be concise, focusing on the author's main contribution, drawing connections to previous readings, and posing some questions to seminar participants. An extra word on participation: you should come prepared to talk not only because this is a graduate seminar but also for the opportunity to enhance your analytical and methodological skills in such an important theoretical and political project: Black Studies! Your participation worth 40% of your grade.

**Weekly Reflection:** There is no mid-term exam. However, on Thursday evenings (until 11:59 PM PST), everyone is required to submit a 500-word reading summary (single-spaced, Times New Roman'12) to be distributed to all seminar participants. You should provide an overview of the assigned texts and then focus on a particular aspect that you think is worth exploring during the seminar discussion. Be aware: if you are the presenter/facilitator of a given week, you are required to deliver a more comprehensive review of the reading materials (instead of the 500-word writing exercise required from everyone). **Presenters** are expected to submit a 1000-word overview of the readings entailing major theoretical arguments, main methodological approaches, and emerging questions.

**Final Conference Paper:** We will reserve the second half of the last two classes (weeks 9 and 10) to conference papers, with four panelists presenting during each session, followed by Q & A. After oral presentation, you will have an extra week to make amendments to your paper, if needed, and submit a final/polished version. When writing your conference paper, please conceive it as a professional exercise. What are the leading conferences in your field? What is expected from a presenter at a major academic conference? [See some important tips here](#). Your paper should be based on a compelling theoretical problem/question that emerges from the seminar and, as much as possible, related to your research agenda (or exploratory research interest if you are in an initial stage of your graduate program). Each presentation should be written in spoken communication and last no more than **20 minutes** (remember, it is a conference paper/oral presentation). You are required to submit the abstract of your conference paper by week #5. The abstract should be no longer than 200 words, Times 12, single-spaced.

**Office hours:** I am aware graduate students have been significantly affected by the current challenges intensified by the pandemic. If there is anything the department of Black Studies or I can do to help you navigate this difficult moment, do not hesitate to let me know. Office hours are held on Fridays, 3:30–4:30 PM. If this time does not work for you, we will work on an alternative. Just send me an email at [jaimervalves@blackstudies.ucsb.edu](mailto:jaimervalves@blackstudies.ucsb.edu)

**Deadlines:** I work with the premise that deadlines are established to be avoided... well, you know what I mean...the last minute panic. Part of the course's success depends on your ability to plan your tasks and schedule your work in advance: i.e., keeping up with the readings, revising your weekly assignments, and getting ready for seminar discussion. Submitting weekly summaries on time will give your colleagues enough time to reading and engaging with your questions. Late assignments will *definitely* not be accepted, unless you have received authorization to do so.

## **COURSE PROGRAM**

### **THEORIES OF THE HUMAN**

#### **Week #1: Frantz Fanon**

1) Fanon, Frantz, *Black Skin, White Mask*. Vol. 36. New York: Grove Press, 1963; (2) Gordon, Lewis. "Through the hellish zone of nonbeing." *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of*

*Self-Knowledge* (2007): 5-12; (3) Marriott, David. "Whither Fanon?." *Textual Practice* 25.1 (2011): 33-69.

### **Week #2: Sylvia Wynter & Hortense Spillers**

(1) Wynter, Sylvia. "Unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom: Towards the human, after man, its overrepresentation—An argument." *CR: The new centennial review* 3.3 (2003): 257-337; (2) Wynter, Sylvia. "On how we mistook the map for the territory, and reimprisoned ourselves in our unbearable wrongness of being, of Desêtre: Black studies toward the human project." *A Companion to African-American Studies* (2006): 107-118; (3) Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's baby, papa's maybe: An American grammar book." *diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 65-81; (4) Spillers, Hortense. "Interstices: A small drama of words." *Pleasure and danger: Exploring female sexuality* (1984): 73-100;

### **Week #3: Denise Ferreira da Silva**

Da Silva, Denise Ferreira. *Toward a global idea of race*. University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

## **AFROPESSIMISM/ NIHILISM & THE AFTERLIFE OF SLAVERY**

### **Week # 4: Black Fungibility and the Afterlife of Slavery**

Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Slavery and Self-Making in 19<sup>th</sup> America*, Oxford Press.

### **Week # 5: Structural Antagonism & The Grammar of Suffering**

Wilderson III, Frank B. *Red, white & black: Cinema and the structure of US antagonisms*. Duke University Press, 2010.

*Abstracts Due (Conference Papers)*

### **Week # 6: Ontological Terror and the Problem of Emancipation**

(1) Warren, Calvin. *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*. Duke University Press, 2018; (2) Sharpe, Christina. "Black studies: In the wake." *The Black Scholar* 44.2 (2014): 59-69; (3) Ray, Sohomyjit. "Afterlives of Slavery, Epistemologies of Race: Black Women and Wake Work." *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 48.1 (2020): 60-63.

## **FRICCTIONS**

### **Week # 7: Afro-Optimism & Black Fugitivity**

(1) Moten, Fred. "The case of blackness." *Criticism* 50.2 (2008): 177-218; Moten, Fred. "Blackness and nothingness (mysticism in the flesh)." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112.4 (2013): 737-780; (2) Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. "The undercommons: Fugitive planning and black study." (2013): 1-60; (3) Thomas, Greg. "Afro-blue notes: The death of afro-pessimism (2.0)?." *Theory & Event* 21.1 (2018): 282-317; (4) Sexton, Jared. "The social life of social death: On Afro-pessimism and Black optimism." *InTensions* 5.1 (2011): 1-47.

### **Week # 8: Indigenous Genocide/Black Slavery /Incommensurability**

(1) King, Tiffany Lethabo. *The Black shoals: Offshore formations of Black and Native studies*. Duke University Press, 2019; (2) Recommended: Sexton, Jared. "The vel of slavery: Tracking the figure of the unsovereign." *Critical Sociology* 42.4-5 (2016): 583-597.

### **Week #9: Antiracism &/as Oblique Identifications**

(1) Vargas, João H. Costa. *The denial of antiracism: Multiracial redemption and Black suffering*. U of Minnesota Press, 2018; (2) Recommended: Winnubst, Shannon. "The many lives of fungibility: anti-blackness in neoliberal times." *Journal of Gender Studies* 29.1 (2020): 102-112;

Conference Paper Presentation (Group A)

### **BLACK DYS/UTOPIAS**

### **Week 10: Carceral Progressivism & Anthropology of Abolition**

(1) Shange, Savannah. *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiracism, and Schooling in San Francisco*. Duke University Press, 2019; Bliss, J. (2015). Hope against hope: Queer negativity, black feminist theorizing, and reproduction without futurity. *Mosaic: a journal for the interdisciplinary study of literature*, 83-98.

Conference Paper Presentation (Group B)

### **FURTHER RECOMMENDED READINGS**

David Marriott, *Whither Fanon?* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018.

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 2004.

Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetic of the Black Radical Tradition*. Duke University Press.

McKittrick, Katherine, ed. *Sylvia Wynter: On being human as praxis*. Duke University Press, 2015.

McKittrick, Katherine. "Mathematics black life." *The Black Scholar* 44.2 (2014): 16-28;

Spillers, Hortense J. "Topographical topics: Faulknerian space." *The Mississippi Quarterly* 57.4 (2004): 535-568;

Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010.

Sharpe, Christina. *In the wake: On blackness and being*. Duke University Press, 2016.

Snorton, C. R. *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017

Spillers, Hortense et, al. "' Whatcha Gonna Do?': Revisiting ' Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book': A Conversation with Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Farah Jasmine Griffin, and Jennifer L. Morgan." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 35(1): 299–309

Zamalin, Alex. *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism*. Columbia University Press, 2019.