

San José State University Department of English and Comparative Literature  
African-American Studies/English 165: Black American Griotic Literature – Spring 2026  
“*I am a griot. It is my job to know the person.*”—*Lamine Kouyate, Dakar, Senegal, December 2025 (translated from its original Wolof)*

Prof. Keenan Norris

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Class Days/Time: T/TH 1:30-2:45PM

Room: Boccardo 326

Office and Office Hours: TH 11:30AM-1:30PM

### **Course Description**

This class will explore the thematic of the Black American griotic voice in literature, its transference from African storytelling practices to the poetry and novels of the Black diaspora, with particular focus on African-American literary history. The class will focus on how writers as historically iconic as Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes and Gil Scott-Heron, and as contemporary as Aracelis Girmay, Carvel Wallace and Percival Everett, have taken up the role of the storyteller, the holder of Black diasporic history, and examiner of the human heart, as well as how their poems and narratives deal with the internal dilemmas, identity creation, compromises, communal and psychic effects of being Black both in America and in the world. It should go without saying that the stories of Black Americans are an indispensable part both of American and World Literature.

### **List of Readings, Docs, Albums**

Books:

*Dust Tracks on a Road* by Zora Neale Hurston

*the black maria* by Aracelis Girmay

*Another Word for Love* by Carvel Wallace (selected chapters)

*James* by Percival Everett

Documentaries:

## Zora Neale Hurston: Claiming a Space

## *A Great and Mighty Walk* by John Henrik Clarke

## Albums:

## [The Revolution Will Not Be Televised](#) by Gil Scott-Heron (selected tracks)

## II. Final Grade Components and Their Value

## Passage and Lecture Response Papers 150 Points

Students will be required to complete a weekly response to a passage in the week's assigned reading or listening. In some weeks, students will instead be asked to reflect on an in-class lecture from the week. These short papers should be analytical in nature but will not have to follow a conventional essay structure.

## Presentation 100 Points

The mid-term presentation can be completed either by individuals or in groups of 2 persons. The presentation will require students to teach critical elements of one of the Week 3-9 major texts. Students may wish to but are not required to incorporate materials from secondary class texts. Students will record their presentations and post them on Canvas. Presentations will be 15-20 minutes in length. Students can do their presentation in any of several ways. They can make a traditional lesson and distribute materials to the class, they can organize a Q&A or a test, they can present a PowerPoint, they can engage and present social media (TikTok video, YouTube, etc.) in an instructive way, they can record an audio or video essay. Be creative.

In addition to posting their presentation on Canvas, there will be a short in-class portion of the presentation: Each student or student group will also answer one or two questions posed by the professor or other students in a 3-5 minute Q&A.

Essay 1 100 Points

Essay 1 will be an analytical essay about themes that connect one of the major texts/films/albums from the first five weeks of class (*Dust Tracks on a Road*; Zora Neale Hurston: Claiming a

Space; The Revolution Will Not Be Televised) with one or more of the shorter texts (Hughes's poems and stories; "Home In, Turn the Party Out"; etc.)

Final Exam Essay 100 Points

The final exam essay will be an in-class essay exam. Its focus will be on how one (or more) of the texts/films/albums under consideration has complicated the student's perspective about one or more of the following: race/ethnicity, revolution, immigration, nationality, slavery, Huckleberry Finn and/or Jim/James, Black masculinity, sexuality, Black womanhood, motherhood, the Black diaspora, or Africa.

Texts/films/albums under consideration: *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised; Another Word for Love; the black maria; James; A Great and Mighty Walk*

Participation 50 Points

Students are expected to attend class regularly and thoughtfully engage in class discussion.

Floating Quizzes

In-class quizzes may be assigned during the term in place of the take-home weekly response papers if student attendance becomes too or if AI use too often crosses the line from assistive to generative. Quizzes would be based on identifying basic aspects of the previous week's reading. Like the response papers, the quizzes would be graded on a 10-point scale.

Extra Credit

The extra credit independent study will require that the student consult with the professor to devise a unique project based on their study of one of the assigned literary texts for the class.

\*All assignments are subject to change of due date, assignment substitution, and cancellation.

## Determination of Grades

The Department of English and Comparative Literature reaffirms its commitment to the differential grading scale as defined by the SJSU Catalog (Grades-Letter Grading). Grades issued must represent a full range of student performance: A+/A/A- = excellent; B+/B/B- = above average; C+/C/C- = average; D+/D/D- = below average; F = failure. Within any of the letter grade ranges (e.g. B+/B/B-), the assignment of a + or - grade will reflect stronger (+) or weaker (-) completion of the goals of the assignment.

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>A+</i>	<i>97 to 100%</i>
<i>A</i>	<i>93 to 96%</i>
<i>A-</i>	<i>90 to 92%</i>
<i>B+</i>	<i>87 to 89 %</i>
<i>B</i>	<i>83 to 86%</i>
<i>B-</i>	<i>80 to 82%</i>
<i>C+</i>	<i>77 to 79%</i>
<i>C</i>	<i>73 to 76%</i>
<i>C-</i>	<i>70 to 72%</i>
<i>D+</i>	<i>67 to 69%</i>
<i>D</i>	<i>63 to 66%</i>
<i>D-</i>	<i>60 to 62%</i>

## Departmental Policy on Grading Written Assignments

Grades issued will adhere to the following SJSU academic standards of assessment:

The ‘ ‘A ’Range ” paper will be well organized and well developed, demonstrating a clear understanding and fulfillment of the assignment. It will show the student’s ability to use language effectively and construct sentences distinguished by syntactic complexity and variety. Such papers will be essentially free of grammatical, mechanical, and usage errors.

The ‘ ‘B ’Range ” paper will demonstrate competence in the same categories as the ‘ ‘A’ Range” paper. The chief difference is that the ‘ ‘B ’Range ” paper will show some slight weaknesses in one of those categories. It may slight one of the assigned tasks, show less facility of expression, or contain some minor grammatical, mechanical, or usage flaws.

The ‘ ‘C ’Range ” paper will complete all tasks set by the assignment, but show weakness in fundamentals (usually development), with barely enough specific information to illustrate the experience or support generalizations. The sentence construction may be less mature, and the use of language less effective and correct than the ‘ ‘B ’Range ” paper.

The ‘ ‘D ’Range ” paper will neglect one of the assigned tasks and be noticeably superficial in its treatment of the assignment – that is, too simplistic or short. The paper may reveal some problems in development, with insufficient specific information to illustrate the experience or support generalizations. It will contain grammatical, mechanical, and usage errors that render some sentences incomprehensible.

The “F” paper will demonstrate a striking underdevelopment of ideas and insufficient or unfocused organization. It will contain serious grammatical, mechanical, and usage errors that render some sentences incomprehensible.

This course must be passed with a C or better as a CSU graduation requirement.

Note that “All students have the right, within a reasonable time, to know their academic scores, to review their grade-dependent work, and to be provided with explanations for the determination of their course grades.” See University Policy F13-1 at <http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/F13-1.pdf>

for more details.

\*Essays and the presentation are subject to change of due date, assignment substitution and cancellation. Failure to submit any of the major essay assignments may result in a failing grade. All major assignments must be turned in for the student to be considered for a passing grade.

Plagiarism and Intellectual Property Theft:

Plagiarism is the intentional or unintentional illegal appropriation of "ideas or writings of another as one's own" (Webster's II New Riverside University Dictionary). As a rule, you should document word-for-word quotations from a source, ideas from a source that you simply put in your own words, tables, charts, graphs and statistics.

\*Any student caught plagiarizing any assignment will face appropriate disciplinary action. This includes the uncited use of ChatGPT and any other language learning model (LLM). You can use language learning models (i.e., ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, etc.) as assistive to your learning process, but not as generative of your work for the class. Generative AI actually produces new content and is prohibited; assistive AI, which is not prohibited, aids in the refinement of content without creation of new content. You can learn more about the important technical and legal differences between the use of assistive versus generative AI by listening to this informational lecture by author K.M. Robinson.

If you elect to use an LLM in any way to craft the work that you submit for this class, you need to properly cite your use of the specific LLM the same as you would any other source that you use. Failure to do so is a violation of academic integrity. Moreover, student writers should be aware that the current LLMs were created via the outright theft of the intellectual property of countless writers, including the work of the professor who is teaching this class. The lawsuit settled by Anthropic, which created Claude, wherein Anthropic was forced to pay \$1.5 billion in damages, is direct evidence of this violation.

Student code of conduct (SJSU and classroom policies):

Students are responsible for maintaining a respectful environment in the classroom. San Jose State is committed to maintaining a safe education and working environment free of discrimination, harassment and sexual violence. Policies are available online at: <http://www.sjsu.edu/studentconduct/policies/> [http://notalone.sjsu.edu/policy\\_information/index.html](http://notalone.sjsu.edu/policy_information/index.html)

Per Title 5, the university prohibits “[activities] that substantially and materially disrupts the normal operations of the University” and “conduct that threatens or endangers the health or safety of any person within or related to the University community, including physical abuse, threats, intimidation, harassment, or sexual misconduct.” Please keep this in mind as you submit work for this course. The work you create in this class should aspire to resemble in quality the work we

read. The work should be literary and character driven (this class is not the place for cat poems, romances, fan-fiction,

fantasy, horror, crime, and the like.) I will not tolerate any work that is gratuitously violent, pornographic. If you aren't sure about your work, see me before distributing it to your classmates.

University Policies Per University Policy S16-9: (<http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S16-9.pdf>), relevant information to all courses, such as academic integrity, accommodations, dropping and adding, consent for recording of class, etc. is available on Office of Graduate and Undergraduate Programs' Syllabus Information web page at <http://www.sjsu.edu/gup/syllabusinfo/>

#### Academic Integrity:

Your commitment, as a student, to learning is evidenced by your enrollment at San Jose State University. The University Academic Integrity Policy S07-2 at

<http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S07-2.pdf> requires you to be honest in all your academic course work. Faculty members are required to report all infractions to the office of Student Conduct and Ethical Development. The Student Conduct and Ethical Development website is available at <http://www.sjsu.edu/studentconduct/>.

#### Campus Policy in Compliance with the American Disabilities Act:

If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, or if you need to make special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible, or see me during office hours. Presidential Directive 97-03 at [http://www.sjsu.edu/president/docs/directives/PD\\_1997-03.pdf](http://www.sjsu.edu/president/docs/directives/PD_1997-03.pdf) requires that students with disabilities requesting accommodations must register with the Accessible Education Center (AEC) at <http://www.sjsu.edu/aec> to establish a record of their disability.

#### Accommodation to Students' Religious Holidays:

San José State University shall provide accommodation on any graded class work or activities for students wishing to observe religious holidays when such observances require students to be absent from class. It is the responsibility of the student to inform the instructor, in writing, about such holidays before the add deadline at the start of each semester. If such holidays occur before

the add deadline, the student must notify the instructor, in writing, at least three days before the date that he/she will be absent. It is the responsibility of the instructor to make every reasonable effort to honor the student request without penalty, and of the student to make up the work missed. See

University Policy S14-7 at <http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S14-7.pdf>.

#### Student Technology Resources:

Computer labs for student use are available in the Academic Success Center at <http://www.sjsu.edu/at/asc/> located on the 1st floor of Clark Hall and in the Associated Students Lab on the 2nd floor of the Student Union. Additional computer labs may be available in your department/college. Computers are also available in the Martin Luther King Library. A wide variety of audio-visual equipment is available for student checkout from Media Services located in IRC 112. These items include DV and HD digital camcorders; digital still cameras; video, slide and overhead projectors; DVD, CD, and audiotape players; sound systems, wireless microphones, projection screens and monitors.

#### SJSU Peer Connections:

Peer Connections, a campus-wide resource for mentoring and tutoring, strives to inspire students to develop their potential as independent learners while they learn to successfully navigate through their university experience. You are encouraged to take advantage of their services which include course-content based tutoring, enhanced study and time management skills, more effective critical thinking strategies, decision making and problem-solving abilities, and campus resource referrals. In addition to offering small group, individual, and drop-in tutoring for a number of undergraduate courses, consultation with mentors is available on a drop-in or by appointment basis. Workshops are offered on a wide variety of topics including preparing for the Writing Skills Test (WST), improving your learning and memory, alleviating procrastination, surviving your first semester at SJSU, and other related topics. A computer lab and study space are also available for student use in Room 600 of Student Services Center (SSC). Peer Connections is located in three locations: SSC, Room 600 (10th Street Garage on the corner of 10th and San Fernando Street), at the 1st floor entrance of Clark Hall, and in the Living Learning Center (LLC) in

Campus Village Housing Building B. Visit Peer Connections website at <http://peerconnections.sjsu.edu> for more information.

SJSU Counseling Services:

The SJSU Counseling Services is located on the corner of 7th Street and San Fernando Street, in Room 201, Administration Building. Professional psychologists, social workers, and counselors are available to provide consultations on issues of student mental health, campus climate or psychological and academic issues on an individual, couple, or group basis. To schedule an appointment or learn more information, visit Counseling Services website at <http://www.sjsu.edu/counseling>.

Learning Environment:

This course calls for and will provide a safe, secure learning environment where students can express their ideas, theories, opinions and views in a civil manner. All State, Federal and District codes protecting students' classroom rights apply in the on-line format and will be observed and enforced. For example, there will be no use of derogatory language (racial, sexual, etc).

VII.

Reading, Viewing & Listening Schedule:

\*Disclaimer: This schedule may change due to time constraints, etc.

WEEK 0: “What is a Griot?” by Fran Kaplan, Ed.D.

WEEK 1: Zora Neale Hurston: Claiming a Space (documentary)

“Home in, Turn the Party Out” by Umi Vaughan, Ph.D.

WEEK 2: *Dust Tracks on a Road* by Zora Neale Hurston

WEEK 3: *Dust Tracks on a Road* by Zora Neale Hurston

WEEK 4: Selected Poems by Langston Hughes

Schomburg cosmogram

WEEK 5: Jess B. Simple stories by Langston Hughes

Nikki Giovanni remembrance (“Nikki-Rosa”)

WEEK 6: ESSAY 1 Due

The Revolution Will Not Be Televised (selected tracks) by Gil Scott-Heron

Selected poems/songs by Amiri Baraka

WEEK 7: *the black maria* by Aracelis Girmay

WEEK 8: *the black maria* by Aracelis Girmay

WEEK 9: PRESENTATIONS (post to Canvas + 5-minute Q&A in class)

*James* by Percival Everett

**SPRING BREAK:** Read *James* by Percival Everett

WEEK 11: *James* by Percival Everett

WEEK 12: *Another Word for Love* (selected chapters) by Carvel Wallace

WEEK 13: *Another Word for Love* (selected chapters) by Carvel Wallace

Visiting Author: TBA

WEEK 14: *A Great and Mighty Walk* by John Henrik Clarke (documentary)

WEEK 15: MFA student Opal Franklin’s discussion of the class’s key themes

FINAL EXAM: IN-CLASS ESSAY

WEEK 16: Extra Credit Projects Due