

**ENGLISH 635-E1: TOPICS IN AMERICAN LITERATURE**  
**COASTAL CAROLINA UNIVERSITY • SPRING 2012**  
**Classtime:** R 4:30-7:20 p.m.  
**Room:** EHFA 104

**Professor:** Dr. Daniel Cross Turner

**Office:** EHFA 222

**Office Hours:** TR 11:00 a.m.-12:10 p.m.; T 1:40-2:40 p.m.; R 1:40-4:20 p.m.; *and by appointment*

**Office Phone:** (843) 349-2432

**Email:** [dturner1@coastal.edu](mailto:dturner1@coastal.edu)

## **STRANGE CURRENCIES: VERY CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURES**

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

**ENGLISH 635:** An exploration of texts from a variety of eras, movements, regions and/or sub-cultures within American Literature. Students will read literary texts, focusing on the social, cultural, historical, and political contexts in which these texts were produced and analyzing the content for cultural-specific themes.

### **COURSE OBJECTIVES:**

The instructional goals for this course include the following:

1. For the student to gain an overall understanding of some of the currents and countercurrents of American literature by engaging with texts and genres germane to this literary history.
2. For the student to explore the relation between these literary forms and contemporaneous intellectual, social, and political matters, including contested issues such as regional definition, nationalism, class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.
3. For the student to expand her knowledge of American literature in its broader contexts by analyzing works in connection with theoretical arguments as well as with other cultural forms and artifacts, such as painting, photography, architecture, popular music, and cinema.
4. For the student to engage with an array of textual forms and styles.
5. For the student to improve her critical thinking and analytical skills.

### **STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES:**

In order to successfully complete the course the student must:

1. Articulate the characteristics (literary, historical, social, and cultural) of significant modes relevant to this span of American literary history.
2. Explain a work in relation to its historical contexts, illustrating how it reflects, influences, or challenges these.
3. Demonstrate, in writing and orally, understanding of important modes relevant to this span of American literary history through a documented research paper on a text or texts.
4. Read the work of published writers with an enhanced appreciation of artistic craft.
5. Communicate effectively and demonstrate an ability to comprehend and analyze written language through clear expression.
6. Make effective and appropriate authorial choices and be able to defend writing choices.
7. Use proper MLA documentation and format.

### **COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING:**

The student is required to read and analyze multiple texts; to attend all scheduled meetings with the instructor and actively engage in discussion of the assigned texts; and to produce and deliver a formal research essay by the end of the semester.

The course grade will be determined as follows:

- **Seminar Paper (40%):** The student will write one formal research essay (20-25 pages) for this course. For this paper, the student will provide a clear and coherent analysis of one or more of the assigned texts on our syllabus. The essay should be cogently argued, mechanically proficient, and amply supported with detailed close readings that set forth the student's interpretation of evidence from the text. The essay should also make use of outside research, incorporating into its main argument a minimum of four legitimate scholarly sources (e.g., scholarly articles, book chapters, books, scholarly interviews). I will give you a specific assignment sheet with detailed instructions concerning the seminar paper.

- **Individual Presentation/Short Essay (25%):** Each student will give an individual presentation (12-15 minutes) on a work we're covering, accompanied by a short essay containing your primary argument and supporting points about the text under scrutiny. This assignment will enable you to hone your oral communication in combination with your writing skills. Your individual presentation should provide relevant biographical and historical background on the author/text under study. More importantly, your individual presentation should be an in-depth analysis of the text in relation to significant cultural and/or theoretical contexts. It should help establish the intellectual parameters of our discussion for that class period. In other words, you should provide your detailed interpretation of significant thematic and stylistic elements of the text. You may present in-depth close readings of particular passages to demonstrate your analysis of the overall point(s) of the given text. Although outside research is not required for this assignment, if you do consult a secondary source(s), you must cite it properly. Often students like to use PowerPoint while delivering their presentation; however, you are not required to do so. On the day you are scheduled to present on your topic (typically our first day of discussion of a particular author/work), you will need to turn in a typed, formal account of your presentation (5-6 pages). This short essay should be written according to the format of an analytical essay. Of course, the foundation of any solid analytical essay is a thesis that is engaging, argumentative, and persuasive. Also ensure that each body paragraph begins with a strong topic sentence, one that is argumentative, is relevant to your thesis, and develops a distinct point.
- **Final Exam (20%):** There will be a final examination to assess student understanding and application of major course concepts.
- **Class Participation/Informal Writing Assignments (15%):** Vigorous and fruitful contributions during discussion sessions are required and graded. The student will participate actively and productively in all discussion sessions. Doing so will develop oral communication skills in addition to writing skills. I may also give you informal writing assignments (sometimes during class, other times in preparation for class) that will be recorded as part of your participation grade.

#### **GRADING SYSTEM (as outlined in the University Catalog):**

Enrollment in a course obligates the student not only for prompt completion of all work assigned but also for punctual and regular attendance and for participation in whatever class discussion may occur. It is the student's responsibility to stay informed concerning all assignments made. Absences, whether excused or unexcused, do not absolve the student from this responsibility.

**A (100-90), B+ (89-87) and B (86-80), C+ (79-77) and C (76-70), D+ (69-67) and D (66-60), and F (59-0)** carry the traditional academic connotations of excellent, good, average, poor, and failing performance, respectively.

#### **ATTENDANCE POLICY:**

The student is required to attend every discussion session. If the student collects **more than one unexcused absence**, she will be penalized by having her semester grade lowered by **one letter grade** for each additional absence (e.g., an A will be lowered to a B; a B will be lowered to a C; and so on). In addition, this instructor will impose a penalty, including assigning the grade of **F**, for **unexcused absences in excess of 30%** of the regularly scheduled discussion sessions. Absences and tardiness do not in any way absolve the student from the responsibility of completing all assigned work promptly. Excuses like work, family, and scheduled doctor's appointments will be declined. The only acceptable "excused absences" are noted in the CCU Catalog. These include documented cases of:

- incapacitating illness
- official representation of the University (excuses for official representation of the University must be obtained from the official supervising the activity)
- death of a close relative
- religious holidays

#### **LATE WORK POLICY:**

Unexcused late work will be penalized **one letter grade per day** including weekends and breaks. Extensions for assignments are rarely given. Only in extreme cases (serious illness, death in the immediate family) will a student be permitted to turn in a late assignment without penalty. Be sure to notify me in advance if you feel you have a legitimate reason for missing a due date.

#### **ACADEMIC INTEGRITY POLICY:**

I enforce a zero tolerance policy with respect to plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty. Plagiarism cases may result in an "F" for the course. Always acknowledge the source for any idea that is not your own, including of course any online sources. An essential part of a liberal arts curriculum is learning to

interpret the world in your own terms; plagiarizing violates this deep responsibility to express your own ideas in your own language.

**FINAL DISCLAIMER:**

The professor claims the right to make slight adjustments to this syllabus when necessary. Listed above are the general terms of our contract for this semester. Exceptions to the rules of the course are rarely given, so see me in advance if you feel you have legitimate extenuating circumstances. If you ever have any questions or concerns about the course or these policies during the semester, please feel free to get in touch with me in person, by phone, or by email. *If you are not available to meet during my office hours, we'll find a mutually agreeable meeting time.*

**TOPIC OVERVIEW: "STRANGE CURRENCIES: VERY CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURES"**

This section of ENGLISH 635 will add both focus and nuance to the overall course description of examining "texts from a variety of eras, movements, regions and/or sub-cultures within American Literature. Students will read literary texts, focusing on the social, cultural, historical, and political contexts in which these texts were produced and analyzing the content for cultural-specific themes." As our course subtitle, "Strange Currencies: *Very Contemporary American Literatures*," suggests, we will address a good deal of contemporary American literature while putting all three of these terms under interpretation. What social, cultural, historical, and political contexts define the "contemporary" world? How does the "contemporary" reflect or respond to earlier eras and movements in American literature and culture? Do contemporary texts extend, expand, explode, or ignore what came before? What peoples, institutions, objects, and geographic areas are included under the concept of "America"? And what constituencies and things are excluded from our understanding of "Americanness"? In what ways has the idea of "America" shifted over time? Moreover, one of our main concerns will be to re-envision eras and movements traditionally associated with American literature by viewing how the American South—stereotypically considered the nation's most "distinct" region—helps us recalibrate what counts as "American literature"? Thus, we will explore contested representations of "Southernness," formulated within as well as outside the region, in a diversity of literary and cultural texts. The South has often been described as a place of cultural backwardness, religious fanaticism, economic destitution and class struggle, and gender as well as racial intolerance. In the literature under scrutiny, we will encounter a range of modes germane to Southern literature and culture, from the pastoral to the gothic and grotesque, and from the primitive to the "postsouthern" and even the transnational or global South. Part of our task will be judging to what degree these forms match up to the changing South as it is in process of becoming increasingly "Americanized," even globalized. The texts for the course respond to a history that encompasses an agricultural society based on chattel slavery, the upheavals of the Civil War and Reconstruction, the racial terrors of the "Jim Crow" South, the spread of industrial and consumer forms of capitalism as well as urban and suburban areas, the rise of the Civil Rights Movement and federally mandated desegregation, and the influx of mass media and pop culture. Mindful that there was/is not merely one South, but many Souths, we will examine the region's sheer diversity *vis-à-vis* "America": *socioeconomic* (e.g., yeoman farming, plantation economy, industrial mills, entrepreneurship, military bases), *geographic/ecological* (e.g., from the mountains of Appalachia to the South Carolina lowcountry, from the pine forests of Arkansas to the swamps of Florida, from the rural hills of southwest Virginia to the urban centers of Atlanta and New Orleans) and *ethnic* (e.g., Native American, Appalachian, Gullah). We will consider the South not in isolation, but in connection with other regions and to the American nation. Finally, we'll interrogate the boundaries of what counts as "literature" by putting samples of traditional literary genres (e.g., novels, short stories, poetry) in play with and against less traditional forms (e.g., memoirs) as well as film and other new media. With this goal of *reconceiving* received literary forms, we'll incorporate analysis of other cultural artifacts, such as antebellum and Civil War daguerreotypes and paintings, documentary footage, and music (e.g., jazz, folk, blues, country, hip hop, and alt rock).

**REQUIRED TEXTS:**

- Josephine Humphreys, *Nowhere Else on Earth* (Penguin)
- Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (Vintage)
- Jason Ockert, *Rabbit Punches* (Fidelity)
- Dan Albergotti, *The Boatloads* (BOA Editions)
- Allison Hedge Coke, from *Rock, Ghost, Willow, Deer* (2004)
- Ron Rash, *Serena* (Ecco)
- Casey Clabough, *Confederado: A Novel of the Americas* (Ingalls Publishing Group)
- Natasha Trethewey, *Thrall* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)

**ASSIGNMENT SCHEDULE:****R 1/17: Deprogramming the Cult of the Lost Cause**

- Victor Fleming (director), *Gone with the Wind* (1939)
- Andrew Hudgins, “After the Wilderness” from *After the Lost War* (1988)
- Grace Simpson, “GWTW” (2001)
- Natasha Trethewey, “Southern History” from *Native Guard* (2006)
- Jake Adam York, “Gone With the Wind” (2008)

**R 1/24: The Southern “Renaissance” I: The Nation’s Region?**

- H. L. Mencken, “The Sahara of the Bozart” (1920)
- F. Scott Fitzgerald, “The Ice Palace” (1920)
- Donald Davidson, “Sequel of Appomattox” (1938)
- William Faulkner, “A Rose for Emily” (1930) and “That Evening Sun” (1931)
- John Jeremiah Sullivan, “Mister Lytle: An Essay” (2010)

**R 1/31: The Southern “Renaissance” II: The Sick South**

- William Faulkner, “Red Leaves” (1930)
- Eudora Welty, “Petrified Man” (1941)
- Flannery O’Connor, “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” (1955) and “Good Country People” (1955)

**R 2/7: Still Sick?**

- Judy Jordan, “Sharecroppers Grave” from *Carolina Ghost Woods* (2000)
- Excerpts from Robert Kirkman (writer) / Tony Moore (illustrator), *The Walking Dead* (2003) [comic book series] from *Volume 1: Days Gone By*
- Excerpts from *True Blood* (2003) [HBO series]: from Season 1

**R 2/14: The PoSo South**

- The Coen Brothers (directors), *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000)
- The Rolling Stones, selected country/blues lyrics
- Percival Everett, “The Appropriation of Cultures” (1996)

**R 2/21: Southbound Beastiaries**

- Dan Albergotti, *The Boatloads* (2008)

**R 2/28: Homing Instincts**

- Jason Ockert, *Rabbit Punches* (2006)

**R 3/7: Southern Expressionism**

- Tim Burton (director), *Big Fish* (2003)
- Daniel Wallace, from *Big Fish* (1998)

**R 3/14: Spring Break****R 3/21: Waxing Poetic/Historic**

- Yusef Komunyakaa, selected poems
- Derek Walcott, selected poems
- Charles Wright, selected poems
- Nikki Finney, selected poems

**R 3/28: Apocalypse, No!: The Undead South**

- Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (2006)

**R 4/4: The Scots-Irish Tragedy: All Unquiet on the Western NC Front**

- Ron Rash, *Serena* (2008)

**R 4/11: South of South:**

- Casey Clabough, *Confederado: A Novel of the Americas* (2012)
- Clabough, from *Inhabiting Contemporary Southern and Appalachian Literature* (2012)
- Clabough, from *The Warrior’s Path* (2007)

**R 4/18: Mixed Memories: Re-remembering the Native South**

- Allison Hedge Coke, from *Rock, Ghost, Willow, Deer* (2004)
- Josephine Humphreys, *Nowhere Else on Earth* (2000)

**R 4/25: Going GloSo: Transcultural Crossings**

- Natasha Trethewey, *Thrall* (2012)

**T 4/30: “Strange Currencies” Forum  
Seminar Essay due (20-25 pages; 40%)**

**Official Exam Period: Final Exam (20%)**