

ENGL 4001 Senior Honors Seminar I
Monday/Wednesday 2:20–3:45 p.m.
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Vernacularity in Medieval and African American Literature

This course explores medieval and African American literature, two historically diverse areas that might initially seem too different to consider together. Yet, both areas share a deep, abiding interest in the vernacular—the language “of the people”—and in culturally informed narrative strategies that highlight the vernacular’s importance. Our focus is thus both linguistic and cultural, drawing literary works not normally studied together into conversations that this class will tease out in dynamic and interesting ways. We will transhistorically consider literary, political, and cultural implications of uses of a vernacular. While late medieval English writers work within a tri-lingual culture comprising two rival vernaculars, African American authors strive to produce a literature that explores the complexity and culture of groups marginalized because they are not fluent in the mainstream’s language. We will consider how vernaculars can intentionally be used to unite or divide, to reinvigorate traditional forms of poetry and prose or create new forms that readily engage linguistic and cultural traditions, to critique oppression, and above all, to say what otherwise could not be said.

While the instructors’ strengths are in medieval and African American literature, this course will also highlight formal issues important to creative writers, questions of rhetoric and discourse analysis of interest to professional writers, and problems related to dialect and multilingualism that will intrigue linguists.

Class assignments will include literary analysis, group work, a midterm, two projects, and a final exam. The course will be tied in with the department’s Shaheen symposium, which in fall 2015 takes up the topic of vernacularity (and offers the opportunity for undergrads to compete to present a paper: watch for the call for papers that will be circulated in April). We will also integrate the Shaheen lecture, to be given this fall by medievalist Nicholas Watson of Harvard University.

Readings will likely be drawn from among the following books, supplemented by other materials:

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales (original-spelling Middle English edition)*, ed. Jill Mann (Penguin, 2005) 978-0140422344
Langston Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (Vintage, 1995) 978-0679764083
Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (CreateSpace Independent, 2012) 978-1475157574
A. C. Cawley, ed., *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays* (Everyman, 1993) 978-0460872805
James Weldon Johnson, *God’s Trombones*, ed. Henry Louis Gates (Penguin, 2008) 978-0143105411
Silence: *A Thirteenth-Century French Romance*, ed. Sarah Roche-Mahd, rev. ed. (Michigan State University Press, 1999) 978-0870135439
Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Harper Perennial, 2006) 978-0061120060
Pearl, ed. Sarah Stanbury (TEAMS, 2001) 978-1580440332
Ishmael Reed, *Flight to Canada* (Scribner, 1998) 978-0684847504
August Wilson, *Seven Guitars* (Plume, 1997) 978-0452276925
Paul Beatty, *The White Boy Shuffle* (Picador, 2001) 978-0312280192