**ENG 229: The Black Vernacular**  
**FSLT Field-of-Study Proposal**

*Proposed field of study.* Literary Studies

*Course number.* English 229

*Course title.* The Black Vernacular

*Catalog description.* Introduction to black vernacular oral and written art. Investigation of the black vernacular tradition in the wider context of American culture.

*Prerequisites.* English 103 with a grade of C or better or exemption.

*Credit.* 1 unit.

*Estimate of student enrollment.* 25

*By whom and when course will be offered.* Bertram Ashe, once every other year.

*Staffing implications.* None

*Adequacy of resources.* Existing library and technological resources are adequate.

*Interdepartmental and interschool implications.* None.

*Contact person.* Louis Tremaine

*FSLT.* This course meets the criteria of the FSLT requirement in several ways. While “concerning itself with verbal texts read as structures of meaning,” it greatly extends students’ idea of what counts as a “verbal text” and their understanding of how one’s reading practices shift in moving from one kind of text to another. By the nature of the material it necessarily exposes students to the methods and perspectives of formalist criticism, genre criticism, and critical race studies. The works studied in the course are placed squarely in relation to their historical and cultural contexts. Students are required to produce close textual analysis in writing in amounts consistent with our other 200-level FSLT courses. A syllabus is attached.

Bertram D. Ashe  
American Studies Program  
University of Richmond  
Fall, 2007

**The Black Vernacular**
“In African American literature, the vernacular refers to the church songs, blues, ballads, sermons, stories, and, in our own era, rap songs that are part of the oral, not primarily the literate (or written down) tradition of black expression. What distinguishes this body of work is its in-group and, at times, secretive, defensive, and aggressive character: it is not, generally speaking, produced for circulation beyond the black group itself (though it is sometimes bought and sold as exotic material by those outside its circle).

So begins “The Vernacular Tradition,” the introduction to the Norton Anthology of African American Literature. All that this course entails is referenced in the above excerpt: we will discuss and confront the inherent contradiction of studying a tradition that is “part of the oral, not primarily literate . . . tradition of black expression” by using a book that is an anthology of texts that are, indeed, “written down.” Primarily, we will study and become familiar with the black vernacular tradition, soon becoming able to recognize such aspects as call and response and improvisation “everywhere” around us, as students soon come to realize. We will study novels, autobiography, music, film, dance, and selected popular culture texts that encompass a range of black social classes, sexual orientations, and genders, peering into each text in order to “read” it from a distinctly black vernacular perspective.

Once we become proficient at recognizing and identifying the vernacular, we will strive to become incisive vernacular analysts. We will begin to talk about what the use of the vernacular by black folk means in the larger American culture. At the same time, we’ll also examine texts from non-black artists and writers, and talk about what it means—not just to (white) America but to black America.

The last portion of the course is devoted to black commentary on white participation in the black vernacular, sometimes while artists are executing their vernacular-based art itself. What is the range of responses available to blacks when confronted with non-black vernacular practitioners? What do those responses tell us about African American culture? About American culture?

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes that Albert Murray, in his work, “inverted the cultural assumptions and verbal conventions: in his discourse, ‘American,’ roughly speaking, means ‘black.’ So, even as the clenched-fist crowd was scrambling for cultural crumbs Murray was declaring the entire harvest board of American civilization to be his birthright.” This course is a comprehensive examination, from several different perspectives and points of view, of the African American vernacular tradition. By the end of the semester, students should be able to read quotations like Gates’s and offer a sustained critique of Murray’s contention, whether you ultimately agree or not. This course uses the black vernacular as a broad, in-depth cultural lens through which to view American culture, and in so doing, seeks to locate the black vernacular in the American imagination.
OFFICE/HOURS: Ryland Hall (289-8292; bashe@richmond.edu); Thursdays, 9:30-10:30 a.m.; Mondays, 12:30-1:30 p.m., or by appointment.

ATTENDANCE: Attendance is required at all class meetings. Unexcused absences are not allowed. Class will begin promptly at 11:15 a.m. Chronic lateness will not be allowed.

PAPERS: Two papers will be assigned, one short, one long, each to be discussed in greater detail later.

**NO LATE PAPERS WILL BE ACCEPTED.** Papers are due at the beginning of class on the due date. Late papers will only be accepted under extremely extraordinary circumstances (say, hospitalization), and proof (a doctor's note) of said extraordinary circumstances is required. Even in such a rare instance a "work in progress" draft must be turned in (by a roommate or family member) at the time the paper is due.

EXAMS: There is no mid-term examination. The final exam, to be discussed in greater detail later, will be take-home, will be handed out on the last day of class.

GRADING:

- PAPER #1 is worth 10% of your final grade.
- PAPER #2 is worth 35% of your final grade.
- The FINAL EXAM is worth 30% of your final grade.

**ACTIVE IN-CLASS PARTICIPATION,** then, is worth the remaining 25% of your grade. Mere attendance, in and of itself, is not considered “active participation.” Reading the assigned material and orally participating in class discussion is considered “active participation.” You will receive an in-class participation grade at mid-term.
The Black Vernacular

Aug 28 Statement
30 “The Vernacular Tradition” Norton Anthology of African-American Literature

Sep 4 “Introduction: The Case for an African-American Aesthetic,” Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin’, and Slam Dunking

11-13 Touré, The Portable Promised Land

17 SCREENING: Tongues Untied
18 Tongues Untied
20 IN-CLASS LECTURE: Bertram Ashe, “Yusef’s Blues; or, Jazz for Dummies” PAPER ONE DUE

25 Albert Murray, “Playing the Blues,” Signifyin(g); James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues”

Oct 2 Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God
4 Their Eyes Were Watching God, cont.
   LECTURE: Juan Williams, “Beyond Black and White/All About Barack and Much More,”
   Modlin Center, 7 p.m.

8 SCREENING: Watermelon Woman
9 Watermelon Woman
11 [no class meeting]
   —Fall Break—
18 Barack Obama, Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance

23 Dreams from My Father, cont.
25 Kevin Young, For the Confederate Dead
   READING: Kevin Young, For the Confederate Dead
   “Whiteness” and the Black Vernacular

30 John Leland, Hip: the History
Nov 1 Hip: the History; Jack Kerouac, “The Beginning of Bop,” “About the Beat Generation,”

5 SCREENING: Pleasantville
6  Pleasantville
8  Bertram Ashe, “The Jazz Musician’s Love-Hate Relationship with Audience,” *Sanctifyin(g)*
9  **PERFORMANCE:** Pat Metheny Trio at Modlin Center

13  The Case of the Dancing Trombonist [handout] **PAPER TWO DUE**

19  **SCREENING:** *Office Space*
20  *Office Space*
20  —Thanksgiving Break—

**Blacks on Whiteness and the Black Vernacular**

27  Juan Williams, *Enough*; Wynton Marsalis, *From the Plantation to the Penitentiary*
28  **SCREENING:** *Bamboozled*
29  *Bamboozled*

Dec 4  Mos Def, “Rock n’ Roll,” *Black on Both Sides* [handout]
6  Course Review