

**ENG 477: Toni Morrison and the Ecology of Community**

**Dr. Elizabeth Cali**

**Peck Hall 3404; T/R 11:00 am – 12:15pm**



*“Literature allows us – no, demands of us – the experience of ourselves as multidimensional persons.”*

*-Toni Morrison-*

*“The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is – it’s to imagine what’s possible.”*

*-bell hooks-*

**Professor Information:**

Dr. Elizabeth Cali

Email: [ecali@siue.edu](mailto:ecali@siue.edu)

**Office Hours:**

Tues/Thurs 12:30 – 1:30 & By  
Appointment

**Course Communication:** The best way to contact me individually is through email at [ecali@siue.edu](mailto:ecali@siue.edu). However, I will post all course announcements and information on Blackboard. Check Blackboard daily for any updates and/or announcements.

**Course Description:** In her essay “Home” Toni Morrison makes an important statement about the power of language in building communities. “Since language *is* community, if the cognitive ecology of

a language is altered, so is the community” (8). This semester we will explore not only the way that Morrison employs language but also the ways she theorizes how language works. We will focus on Morrison’s conceptions of language, and its role in constructing cognitive ecologies, vernaculars, nations, shared histories, and imagined futures. Students will be encouraged and challenged to think about the ways that one of the most prolific and vital authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century uses novelistic structures, themes, and tropes central to African American literary traditions to conduct work that she terms both necessary and dangerous.

As an expansive study of Toni Morrison’s oeuvre, this class explores Morrison’s works of literary criticism and theory, novels, public speeches and interviews, editorials and personal narrative as this full body of work contributes to the vast field of African American literature and cultural expression. In considering the many dimensions of Morrison’s work, we will research and explore primary source materials, examining the inextricable relationship Morrison builds between Black cultural expression and histories of slavery, trauma, protest, and liberation. Students should plan to participate in many ways this semester, including small and large group class discussion, informal student presentations, and interaction with range of media to demonstrate new insights about and from Toni Morrison.

**Topic Specific Course Goals and Learning Objectives:**

- (1) Acquire knowledge of Toni Morrison’s broad range of fictional and nonfictional literary work and the critical conversations about Morrison’s work in the field of African American literary studies.
- (2) Expand and develop thinking about the meaning of community and the many definitions of community as they relate to race, culture, gender, sexuality, spirituality, nationalism and more.
- (3) Practice asking productive research questions conducive to thinking about African American literary studies
- (4) Become familiar with the tropes, methods, themes, and stylistic approaches specific to African American literature, and Toni Morrison’s literary oeuvre in particular
- (5) Gain experience in tracing the historical and sociopolitical allusions in a text and synthesizing research findings with literary arguments

**General Course Learning Objectives:**

- 1) Exercise and improve upon current analytical and interpretive reading strategies
- 2) Expand critical writing abilities toward polishing skills in sustaining complex arguments which incorporate secondary critical resources

- 3) Gain experience in conducting relevant historical and sociopolitical research which enhances textual analysis
- 4) Exercise skills in utilizing historical and sociopolitical information to inform literary analysis
- 5) Develop abilities in applying critical and theoretical concepts and engaging in scholarly arguments

### **Required Course Texts and Materials:**

- ❖ *What Moves at the Margin* (Listed as *What Moves* in the reading schedule)
- ❖ *Playing in the Dark*
- ❖ *Sula*
- ❖ *Song of Solomon*
- ❖ *Beloved*
- ❖ *The Black Book*
- ❖ Selected Blackboard Readings/Videos

### **Classroom expectations:**

Cell phones/ Laptops: Cell phones and laptops are welcome in this class! Our activities will often include digital engagement.

Classroom Conduct and Course Content: This classroom is intended for the exchange of ideas, insights, and inquiries. We will undoubtedly come across literature and themes which cause students to feel excitement, joy, guilt, passion, fear, anxiety, and anger often at varying intervals. Our readings in this class include challenging subject matter addressing slavery, racial conflict, racism, white supremacy, rape, bodily, verbal, and institutional violence. Expect to experience intellectual discomfort as we explore a range of perspectives on these subjects – this is a valuable part of learning. Discussion of the above subject matter in a public forum can be painful, heavy, and personally challenging. I ask that we respect one another's responses the topics and themes of the course. You are always welcome to address specific personal concerns with me.

A note on language: As Toni Morrison demonstrates, language is powerful, it has the ability to liberate and to enact violence. The reading content in this course includes language that conveys long histories of violence that impact our present. In particular, there may be instances when our assigned readings or the sources students find and share from their research include the n-word. This word in particular is language created to do violence and that continues to inflict pain and trauma when repeated, even when quoting from a text for academic purposes. We will not ignore the presence and significance of such terms in our readings, however, as a class policy I ask that students not use such harmful language in class or in their writing, even when quoting from the text. Rather, use a replacement such as 'n-----' or similar.

### **Assignments and Grade Distributions:**

#### Assignment and Grade Distribution Overview

Class Preparation and Participation – 70 points  
 Novel Quizzes – 6 x 10 = 60 points  
 Journals – 7 x 10 = 70 points  
 Essay – 100 points  
 Digital Exhibit Workshops & Conferencing – 25 points  
 Digital Exhibit Display – 25 points  
 Introducing Morrison: Digital Exhibit – 150 points

Total: 500 points

Grade Scale:

A: 450-500 points  
 B: 400-449 points  
 C: 350-399 points  
 D: 300-349 points  
 F: 299 and below

Class Prep and Participation

Class preparation and participation are critical to your success in this course. **Reading listed for each date should be completed *before* and in preparation for that date's class session.** Students self-grade their participation in this class. A rubric for this grade is available on Blackboard and will be reviewed together in class.

Novel Quizzes:

There will be 7 quizzes focused solely on assigned reading from the novels we are covering. If there is an asterisk (\*) next to a week, we will have a quiz one of the days that week. We will never have two quizzes in one week, and quizzes only take place on days we are reading from a novel. I will drop the lowest quiz grade, so 6 will count. I will review the types of questions posed in the quizzes for your preparation.

Journals

There are 8 Journal Entry Dates, you may skip or drop the grade of any one of these journal entries. 7 will count. Journal entries are always due on Fridays and should be reflections on any of the reading from the previous week. They do not need to reflect on *all* of the reading from the week, though if you want to connect a nonfiction essay or critical article with the novel we are reading, that's great! To be considered *complete*, journal entries should contain three components: (1) a **probing question or observation that won't leave you alone** directly related to the readings from the week; (2) critical **meditation** on this question or observation (how you think you might answer the question, some interpretations of the observation you've made, etc); (3) **Direct quotation of passage(s)** from the reading that helps you to address your observation or question. Journals can be personal in narrative style and are not subject to strict rules of formatting and grammar. Go for about 300 words.

Essay: Each student will write a 6-8 page essay in this class. You choose which of Morrison's novels your essay will address and sign up for the corresponding date. Graduate students will write an 8-10 page conference essay in this class. The essay should include these resources in forming a unique and thought provoking argument about one or more of Morrison's novels: 1 work of Morrison's nonfiction, at least 1 peer reviewed article, and 1 of Morrison's novels. See Blackboard for a full assignment description.

Introducing Morrison: Digital Exhibit: In the culminating project in this class, students will curate an extensive digital exhibit contextualizing and mapping the contemporary resonances of one of Morrison's novels (you pick the novel). These exhibits include a critical introduction which requires engagement with Morrison's nonfiction writings covered in this course, and further available to you in *Playing in the Dark* and *What Moves at the Margin*. See Blackboard for a full assignment description.

**Semester Schedule** [Subject to change at instructor's discretion, assignment deadlines in bold]

**Week 1** – Reading listed for each date should be completed *before* and in preparation for that date’s class session

**T 1/10 :** Introduction to one another, Morrison and African American Literary Studies, and our course plan.

**R 1/12:** Toni Morrison, Editor, Author, Public Intellectual – *The Black Book*

**Week 2**

**T 1/17:** *BB*: “Home” by Toni Morrison, from *The House that Race Built* (ed. Wahneema Lubiano)

**R 1/19:** *BB*: “Goodness, Altruism, and the Literary Imagination” Morrison Ingersoll Lecture at Harvard Divinity School

**F 1/20: Journal 1 Due on Blackboard by 11:59 pm**

**Week 3**

**T 1/24:** *Playing in the Dark* “Black Matters,” p.1-28

**R 1/26:** *Playing in the Dark* “Romancing the Shadow” p.31-59

**F 1/27: Journal 2 Due on Blackboard by 11:59 pm**

**Week 4\***

**T 1/31:** *BB*: “Memory, Creation, and Writing” by Toni Morrison; *Sula*, Foreword xi-xvii

**R 2/2:** *Sula*, p.3 – p. 48

**F 2/3: Journal 3 Due on Blackboard by 11:59 pm**

**Week 5\***

**T 2/7:** *Sula* p. 49 – 85 (end of Part I)

**R 2/9:** *Sula* p. 89 – End

**F 2/10: Journal 4 Due on Blackboard by 11:59 pm**

**Week 6**

**T 2/14:** *BB*: “Toni Morrison’s *Sula*: A Satire on Binary Thinking” by Rita Bergenholtz

**R 2/16:** *What Moves*: “The Site of Memory” p.65-80

**F 2/17: Essays on *Sula* due on Blackboard by 11:59 pm**

**Week 7\***

**T 2/21:** *Beloved* (Foreword – p.100)

**R 2/23:** *Beloved* (p.101 – 180)

**F 2/24: Journal 5 Due on Blackboard by 11:59 pm**

**Week 8\***

**T 2/28:** *Beloved* (p.181 – 256)

**R 3/2:** *Beloved* (p.257– End)

**F 3/3: Journal 6 Due on Blackboard by 11:59 pm**

**Week 9 – Spring break – Classes do not meet**

**Week 10**

**T 3/14: BB:** “Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” by Courtney Thorsson (*Remarkable Receptions* podcast) & “Black Writers in Praise of Toni Morrison (from the *New York Times*)

**R 3/16: BB:** “Fixing Methodologies” by Barbara Christian

**F 3/17: Essays on *Beloved* due on Blackboard by 11:59 pm**

**Week 11\***

**T 3/21: *What Moves:*** “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” p. 56-64

**R 3/23: *Song of Solomon* (Foreword – p 89)**

**F 3/24: Journal 7 Due on Blackboard by 11:59 pm**

**Week 12\***

**T 3/28: *Song of Solomon* (p.90 – 186)**

**R 3/30: *Song of Solomon* (p.187 – 258)**

**F 3/31: Journal 8 Due on Blackboard by 11:59 pm**

**Week 13\***

**T 4/4: *Song of Solomon* (p. 259 – End)**

**R 4/6: BB:** “Civilizations Underneath” by Gay Wilentz

**F 4/7 Essays on *Song of Solomon* due on Blackboard by 11:59pm**

**Week 14**

**T 4/11: BB:** “Literature and Public Life”; Final Projects Introduced; brainstorming

**R 4/13: *What Moves:*** “Rediscovering Black History” p. 39-55 & *The Black Book*

**Week 15**

**T 4/18** - Constructing Exhibits; Archival Research

**R 4/20 – Primary Sources Workshop & Conferencing**

**Week 16**

**T 4/25 - Introduction workshop & Conferencing**

**R 4/27** - Digital Exhibit Display

**F 4/28** – Optional Essay Revisions Due by 11:59 pm

**Monday 5/1** – Final Introducing Morrison: Digital Exhibit due by 11:59 pm. You are not done with the project until you have received an email from me saying that I can open your project.

**There is no final exam in this class – Have a glorious summer!**