

# THEO 650: THEOLOGIES OF BLACK LIFE

instructor: Dr. Brian Bantum

e-mail: [brian.bantum@garrett.edu](mailto:brian.bantum@garrett.edu)

office hours: by appointment

weekly meetings/modality:

Mondays, 6:30-9:30pm (central time)

synchronous, online

---

## Course Description

This course will journey with contemporary theologians who are thinking and living within that black diasporic existence in America. Examining theologians and black intellectuals of religion who have written in the last twenty years, we will ask how black life is imagined and re-imagined in response to the denials of its humanity, and how understandings of God shape and are shaped by realities of suffering, survival, and hope, whether in wide movements or everyday modes. Even more, we will consider the various theological imaginations of black life - its thriving, its hope, its experience of being human that might inform how all of us live together.

The language of *journey* is intentional here. This course will not offer a history of African American Christianity or a thematic classification of various schools of thought. Instead, we will walk with particular thinkers and writers, asking how they describe their world, God, black life, and ask what emerges from our time together. In light of this, the readings of this course are the content. They are the conversation partners.

---

## Learning Objectives

- Identify significant themes in contemporary theological articulations of black life in the United States.
- Examine relationships between contemporary theological, religious, or spiritual explications of black life.
- Identify and compare differences in approaches, questions, and sources of black theological reflection in the United States.

---

## Course Readings

### Required

- Alice Walker. *The Color Purple*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1992. [isbn: 978-0151191543, \$0.00-\$7.89] *\*any edition is acceptable*
- Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*. New York: Vintage, 1992. [isbn: 978-1400033423, Amazon, \$13.49]
- Katie G Cannon, and Anthony B. Pinn. *Oxford Handbook of African American Theology*. Cary: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2014. [isbn: 978-0190917845, Amazon, \$47.72, free online library access] **\*readings from this text will be assigned throughout the semester.**

*\*Remaining readings will be provided as pdfs on Moodle.*

---

## Assignments

### Weekly Connections (30%)

Each week you will have an opportunity to highlight a passage from the weekly reading. Some weeks there will be a prompting question, if there is no question you are free to discuss any observation or connection that struck you as you read. Responses should highlight connections with other passages and work to exegete or analyze what is at stake for the author in that particular passage. Responses should be 300-500 words for master's students and 500-750 words for doctoral students. Citations should be parenthetical.

Reflections and forums are graded as done/not done. You should complete 10 exercises over the course of the semester for full credit (this allows for approximately 2 "free" weeks for you to use as you need to.) The total reflection grade will drop by 10% for each missed reflection under the 10 required.

Ideally, the reflections should be completed before class each week. The reflections are your engagement with the readings for the week and help all of us to be connected to each other and the content during our time together. That said, I also realize there are weeks where things come up, life fills up and you may have read but not been able to get to reflecting. Reflections can be posted up to 5 days after the due date. Reflections will not be accepted after 5 days (the Friday after each class meeting).

### Midterm Check-in/synthesis (30%)

*For Master's students*

At the midpoint of the semester students will complete an online, open book responsive writing exercise where you will be asked to respond to a series of questions about the previous week's readings. These questions are NOT exam questions eliciting specific answers. These questions will be drawn from the weekly connection prompts and will be an opportunity for you to make connections, observations, identify themes, similarities or contrasts, as well as pose questions that have emerged for you during the first half of the class. Responses will be graded based on their engagement with the texts and how well they display understanding of the key figures discussed.

Responses are graded based on:

1. how well you understand the concepts/ideas each questions asks
2. how clearly you connect the themes ideas to specific texts/passages

### *For Doctoral Students*

Sample Comprehensive Exam Questions (30%) - This exercise asks you to imagine you doing one of your comprehensive exams on theology and the black diaspora. Develop write two sample comprehensive exam questions and brief annotations regarding the framework and thought process behind the question.

The exercise will be comprised of three parts.

1. Explicate your process or approach to the questions. Are you looking to identify major figures? Themes? Connections between theologians and ideas? A cultural moment, problem or gap?
2. Bibliographic work. What are the texts that you need to work with to identify the themes or understand the key figures. Where do you start? As you build this list ask yourself why you are including or excluding some texts. Where do you see the same names being invoked? Who are the interlocutors? Are there patterns in the interlocutors or source material or theorists?
3. Exam questions. Write two exam questions. Exam questions can vary from field to field, but at their heart exams are an opportunity to demonstrate an awareness of the key questions or dialogues in a specific area or sub-field and begin to make connections between ideas, histories, and/or methods. Exam questions display your understanding of the broader conversations by asking specific questions within that field. The interlocutors you choose are representative of broader ideas you have identified in the scholarly literature/discourse. Your question should work with a specific figure or two, a very specific idea.concept, and a comparison, contrast, relationship.

## **Final Paper (40%)**

Students will offer a final paper (2000-3000 words for masters students, 3000-4000 words for doctoral students). In this paper I would like to reflect on a major theme or idea that emerged for you during class. Your writing will consist of three parts.

*Part I* (250 words)

Create a list of observations or connections, or perhaps note patterns you noted or a question or tension that seemed to come up again and again. These do not have to be full sentences or paragraphs, just a bulleted list.

*Part II* (1500-2000 words)

Choose one of these themes or patterns and reflect on how you saw that theme or pattern develop during the course of the semester, or perhaps compare two different writers approach to a given theme. Attend to specific passages and writings. Stick close to the text and look for the nuances in the similarities or differences you observe. Think about the context or the problems each person is trying to address and how they are in dialogue with others before them.

*Part III* (250-500 words)

What are you taking with you from the readings and class sessions? What are the questions or insights these writers, thinkers, and artists have offered to you?

---

## Schedule

We will begin with a brief welcome and introduction to the course, assignments, structure, etc. Come to class on the 11th having read James Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues" and watched the episode about Afrofuturism. Chapter 3 of the Oxford Handbook of African American Theology, "African American Religious Experience" by Shawn Copeland.

We will meet online using Microsoft Teams.

### Week 1 (September 11) Introduction

James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues"  
"Afrofuturism" PBS documentary episode

### Week 2 (September 18)

Shawn Copeland, "African American Religious Experience"  
James H. Evans Jr. "Revelation and Liberation" in *We Have Been Believers*

### Week 3 (September 25)

Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (p. 1-139\*)  
*\*this page ends with "Celie, I must stop now. The sun is not so hot now and I must prepare for the afternoon classes and vesper service. I wish you were here with me, or I with you."*

Week 4 (October 2)

Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (p. 140-286)

Week 5 (October 9)

Delores Williams, *Sisters In the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*  
Katie Canon, *Wounds of Jesus: Womanist Perspectives*

Week 6 (October 16)

James Cone, selections

Week 7 (October 23)

Emilie Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*  
Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones, "Couwenbergh's The Rape of the Negress: Visual Violence,  
Theological Erasure, and Black Feminist Fugitivity."

Week 8 (October 30)

Shawn Copeland, "Turning Theology: Blackness Past, Blackness Future"  
Charles Long, *Significations*

Week 9 (November 6)

Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness* + selections  
Tamura Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged*

Week 10 (November 13)

Ashon Crawley, *Black Pentecostal Breath* + selections

Week 11 (November 20)

No class - Thanksgiving  
\*begin reading Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

Week 12 (November 27)

Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*

Week 13 (December 4)

Willie James Jennings (selections)

Eboni Marshall Turman (selections)

Week 14 (December 11)

N.K. Jemisin, selections

Arthur Cole Riley, *This Here Flesh* (selections)

---

## Course Policies

This course follows all school academic policies and procedures, which can be accessed in their entirety on the Registrar section of MyGETS at this link: [https://mygets.garrett.edu/ICS/Registrar\\_and\\_Advising/Common\\_Syllabus\\_Policies.jnz](https://mygets.garrett.edu/ICS/Registrar_and_Advising/Common_Syllabus_Policies.jnz)