



University of Pittsburgh
School of Education
Department of Educational Foundations, Organization, and Policy, Spring 2025

Antiblackness, Civil Society, and Education (EDUC 3087)

A Freedom Seminar

Image credit: "At the Gates" by Susan Bernstine

3 Semester Hours
Hybrid (Online Location TBD)
Zoom Location: <https://pitt.zoom.us/my/tedancy2>
Mondays, 4:30 - 7:05 pm

A Living Course Syllabus¹

CO-INSTRUCTORS:

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Meetings by appointment via Calendly: www.calendly.com/tedancy2

Course Description²

In this seminar, we examine the claims of Afropessimism as a metatheory concerned with antiblackness. Our goal is to grasp: 1) the "hows" and "whys" of Afropessimist rhetoric, 2) how this architecture critiques civil society, its schooling projects (broadly conceived) and freedom interventions, and 3) how Black feminist and Black queer theory serve as foundation to Afropessimist critiques about Blackness and its relationship to human categories and designations (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, student, teacher). We will consider Afropessimism's troubling of humanist and critical theories (e.g., psychoanalysis, Marxism, and non-Black feminist and queer theory, among others) and build out our own analytic capacities for educational scholarship. Poetry, music, film and other art forms will also serve as texts to help us in our attempt to more clearly articulate a critical Black studies in the field of education, and a critical engagement of education in

¹ This syllabus' "living" model is indebted to the imagination and work of Sabina Vaught and the Pitt SOE's Commons for Critical Pedagogy and Leadership. A living syllabus advances principles of collective teaching and learning through a dynamic, dialogic, and shared praxis of co-construction.

² Thanks, Michael Dumas, for collaborative thinking.

Black studies.

Assumptions about the Field and Study of Education:

In this course, we deliberately move from theoretical texts in critical Black studies, many outside of the field of education, to rather standard, even hegemonic narratives about Black education, and the schooling of Black children and adults. Paying attention to course aims as well as the mix of people attracted to this class requires dual engagement of work in critical Black studies and in the field of education, and more narrowly, in the study of Afropessimism and antiblackness.

We begin in our work together with the following knowledge – education is a decidedly applied field. That is, we are inherently invested in practice, not simply as an idea, but as implementable operations, either by us directly, or through our students and other partners in the communities within which we work. The theoretical work we will engage in is deeply committed to the idea of freedom with some taking up the challenge of imagining what practices might move us toward realization of these imaginations of freedom. Here, we believe, is an opportunity to explore the tensions between theory and praxis, and between theory and the applied – the impulse in education toward what are called “Monday morning solutions.” Theory should facilitate deeper consciousness and understanding (of the precise nature) of suffering, death, deception, control. It may also help us envision what refusal, resistance, life, and freedom looks like (and requires). Education as an applied field offers the possibility of praxis. However, it is also a field replete with violence and threat of violence against those who might wish to engage in liberatory practice, either as students, educators, or as cousins and aunties. In this tension, we decide what knowledge informs both Black theorizing and Black educational praxis, in and outside of schools (and colleges).

Let us check-in frequently—as a class and in one-on-one meetings (as needed)—about how you are experiencing the course, and how you are progressing with the readings and assignments. We should all agree to make adjustments to the syllabus as needed. We invite all of you to review what is proposed here, and we can make initial revisions based on our collective interests, and our sense of what we need to do together. **We, the course instructors, also invite you to interact with this syllabus, posing questions and sharing resources.** Also, if at any time, it seems that the reading is excessive, we can talk about learning/engagement approaches (which are various); if there are additional readings we believe necessary to add, let us, as a community, find a way to familiarize ourselves, drawing upon the capacities of a living syllabus.

Course Objectives (Feel free to add):

1. *Think* critically about the project of Afropessimism as a metatheory and as an area of study concerned with antiblackness³
2. *Rethink* slavery as a relational dynamic and (re)consider its recompositions/reenactments across time, space, and place

³ We capitalize *Black* when referencing Black people, organizations, cultural products and kinships associated with the self-determination of this racialized social group. Like Dumas (2016), we do not capitalize antiblackness as the term does not refer to the definition of Black people noted in this footnote per se, “but a social construction of racial meaning” (Dumas, 2016, p. 13), or what is imagined *about* Black people rather than what Black people and organizations self-determine.

3. *Examine* how various social actors make meaning of civil society and schooling in relation to Afropessimism and antiblackness
4. *Explore* (and, perhaps, trouble) the desires and yearnings of actors within formal and informal educational spaces
5. *Interrogate* antiblackness as a violent ontological, ideological and material force in the world and education as well as in relation to supremacies (e.g., settler colonialism, white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy)
6. *Examine* the possibilities and impossibilities of civil society and education as it relates to antiblackness and “the Black” (everything we associate with Black people and/or Blackness)
7. *Develop* deep(er) knowledge of the cultural politics of society and schooling as a site of contestation over the meaning and being of Blackness

Course Methods/Professor Relationality⁴:

1. The rigorous praxis of a collective learning community will:
 - aspire to close readings of the assigned texts, and discussion of the primary arguments advanced in the texts, and how they relate to arguments in other texts (both from our reading and your own reading outside of this class).
 - support individual students in: developing emerging lines of inquiry into the principles, storytelling, and themes of a small set of knowledge traditions.
 - nurture the intellectual practices to generalize these to specific educational and/or schooling settings (spatial) and across time periods (temporal).
 - enhance collaborative and independent critical-analytical writing skills
 - build collaborative, advanced writing skills, in the traditions of insurgent knowledge exchange
 - deepen familiarity with the complex relationship between ideologies and practices within and outside schools (and colleges)
2. We will provide advisement and engagement that intend to support our thinking and your academic projects. We encourage students to openly communicate with us and provide thoughts about their experience in the course. You may find us most easily reached by e-mail. However, we are available if an appointment is needed. If, for any reason, you feel you are unable to meet responsibilities (see below), please communicate with Professor Dancy in advance so we might discuss supportive ways we might move forward in the interest of your learning.

Responsibilities/Principles⁵

1. It is your responsibility to co-create a rigorous and generative learning environment in which you challenge one another’s ideas in a scholarly manner, but never insult or disparage one another.
2. It is your responsibility to engage the ideas, discussions, and materials provided in this class in ways that *enhance and strengthen your own interests*.

⁴ Thanks to Dr. Sabina Vaught for collaborative thinking.

⁵ Thanks to Dr. Sabina Vaught and Chris Wright for collaborative thinking.

3. It is your responsibility to submit only your own original work and abide by the University of Pittsburgh academic integrity guidelines. Please visit:
https://www.provost.pitt.edu/sites/default/files/academic_integrity_guidelines.pdf
 and familiarize yourself with codes of academic integrity. Here are helpful videos provided on academic integrity:
 - Academic integrity: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDFHd_31e_o
 - Plagiarism: <http://en.writecheck.com/blog/2013/10/16/3-ways-to-avoid-plagiarism-summary-paraphrase-and-quote-video>
4. It is our responsibility to engage with difficult readings and ideas as we undertake the study of repressive systems and oppressive institutions. Not all members of the class will respond to the readings in the same manner, and some readings will upset some students more than others. In light of this, there is no clear way to warn students in advance. Moreover, we as a community do not want to unintentionally engage in censorship (<http://signsjournal.org/currents-trigger-warnings/halberstam/>
https://www.salon.com/2014/05/20/no_trigger_warnings_in_my_class_why_you_won%E2%80%99t_find_them_on_my_syllabi/).

What we can do as a community is:

- Recognize and affirm that affective responses to readings and discussions are part of a just intellectual project
- Check in with one another in ways that honor our differences but affirm our membership in a community of conscience
- Excuse ourselves when needed and without explanation in order to take necessary space
- Listen carefully and attentively to one another's experiences and ideas, recognizing those as gifts to the community
- Make culturally specific requests as soon as you realize you need to

Framework for shared inquiry:⁶

• ***Stretch*** enables a question to reach further than the immediate object without bypassing its particularity—rather than merely asking a community, “Why do you want this development project?” one asks, “What is development?”

• ***Resonance*** enables a question to support and model nonhierarchical collective action by producing a hum that, by inviting strong attention, elicits responses that do not necessarily adhere to already existing architectures of sense making. Ornette Coleman's harmolodics exemplify how such a process makes participant and audience a single, but neither static nor closed, category (Rycenga 1992).

• ***Resilience*** enables a question to be flexible rather than brittle, such that changing circumstances and surprising discoveries keep a project connected with its purpose rather than defeated by the unexpected. For example, the alleged relationship between contemporary prison expansion and slavery falls apart when the question describes slavery in terms of uncompensated labor because very few of the 2.2 million prisoners in the United States work for anybody while locked in cages. But the relationship remains provocatively stable when the question describes slavery in terms of

⁶ The section is adapted from a syllabus authored by Sabina Vaught. It is also a guiding framework for the Practices of Freedom syllabus.

social death and asks how and to what end a category of dehumanized humans is made from peculiar combinations of dishonor, alienation, and violent domination (Patterson 1982; Gordon 2006).

passage from: Ruth Wilson Gilmore, pp. 37-38, [“Forgotten Places and the Seeds of Grassroots Planning”](#) in Charles R. Hale, Ed., *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, University of California Press, 2008, pp. 31-61)

Resources & Accommodations⁷

Pitt non-discrimination policy: <https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/about/notice-non-discrimination>

Parenting and pregnant student rights:
<https://www.gradstudies.pitt.edu/student-life/resources-pregnant-and-parenting-students>

LGBTQIA rights:
<https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/resources/resources-diverse-populations/lgbtqia-resources>

Codes of conduct and violence against women:
<https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/title-ix-policies-and-procedures>

Gender transition and inclusion guidelines:
<https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/guidelines-inclusion-relating-gender-transition>

Disability accommodation. Any student who needs accommodations should inform me at the beginning of the course or as soon as one needs accommodations. To receive accommodations, you must apply for services with the Pitt Office of Disability Resources and Services, 140 William Pitt Union, 3959 Fifth Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15260, Phone: 412-648-7890, Monday – Friday: 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., Email: DRSRECEP@pitt.edu

NOTE: It is possible that university language around equity and inclusion follows antiquated frameworks. For instance, you may find that the parenting and pregnant students policy does not speak to various pathways of parenting and family. Should you be adopting, fostering, or otherwise significantly shifting your dependent care demands, or should you be a student whose gender is not clearly covered by the policy and is pregnant, etc., and would like accommodations, please let me know as soon as possible so we can work together to establish a fair plan. Let us also work together to establish plans anywhere and when institutional policy and guidelines do not accommodate needs.

Absences. Please notify the professor of any anticipated absences by the second week of class (if possible). This will support the organization of class.

Writing resources and support. Call upon CLOE. Seek:

C **Clarity** with respect to expression, grammar, meaning, sentence structure, and paragraph structure.

L **Logic** in the presentation of arguments, positions, treatment of issues, and conclusions

⁷ Thanks to Dr. Sabina Vaught for collaborative thinking.

O **Organization** that builds a coherent structure (consider an outline)

E **Evidence** to support statements and opinions of the writer/speaker. Ask yourself, ‘on what basis am I making claims?’

The most recent edition of APA will articulate more specific guidelines. Please note that dissertations in the education field and publications in education journals usually require APA formatting.

Additionally, the Pitt Writing Center offers services for graduate students. You may schedule appointments at writingcenter.pitt.edu. Location: 3178 O’Hara Student Center, 4024 O’Hara Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15260, Phone: 412-624-6556.

Assignment due dates. All work is due on the due date. Please contact the instructor if the assignment will be late to discuss context and possibilities.

Inclement weather policy. If Pitt is closed due to inclement weather or other conditions, students are to assume that all classes on and off campus are cancelled and all offices in all units will be closed.

Formatting. American Psychological Association. (2019). Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (7th ed.). Washington, DC.

Text to Speech Readers

- Speechify app (free and paid versions) <https://speechify.com/>
- Natural readers (free and paid versions) <https://www.naturalreaders.com/>

Resources for Life Circumstances

For any of the below, if you believe your circumstances may affect your performance in the course, please advise Professor Dancy (if comfortable):

Campus Police: [Cops Off Campus Coalition – an abolition network to get cops off campus and cops off the planet](#)

Hunger. Pitt Pantry offers the following: “All members of the Pitt community are welcome to visit the pantry. Through a self-certification form, shoppers are eligible to use the pantry if they earn less than 150% of the federal poverty line, a state regulation, which equals \$18,090 for a household of one and \$24,360 dollars for a household of two.” For questions regarding eligibility, please email pantry@pitt.edu. Additional resources are the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank (pittsburghfoodbank.org).

Safe and stable shelter. Please see resources at the following links:

Housing and housing justice: honorscollege.pitt.edu

Housing resources: pitt.libguides.com

Women’s Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh. The 24-hour hotline is 412-687-8005. The website is wcspittsburgh.org

SisTers PGH Community Center is a safe space for trans people of color. Phone: 412-259-3091,

Website: www.sisterspgh.com

Racialized and gender-based discrimination. Contact the Pitt Title IX Office. Community members may visit the office during scheduled office hours without an appointment. Students, staff and faculty can also call 412-648-4034 or email to schedule an appointment. For more information, go to <https://www.titleix.pitt.edu/policies-procedures>.

Sexual violence. The Pitt Student Affairs site offers several resources and contact numbers. Visit studentaffairs.pitt.edu.

Course Readings:

A collection of readings has been selected for our consideration. All (except required books) readings will be uploaded to an online platform (probably Box) for your convenient access.

Required Texts:

See the Schedule of Readings and Activities

Most readings available through the University of Pittsburgh Library System: University of Pittsburgh Library System

COURSE CONTRIBUTIONS

Dialogue⁸

Much of the work in this class is shared and interdependent. Hence, our learning is contingent upon your reading and writing deeply. Preparation and participation are the highest values. Grades are reflections, as much as possible, of two things: 1) your contribution to the collective learning process and 2) your intellectual growth over the semester determined in our in-class dialogue and our engagement with your thinking/writing over time. Members of our learning community are also expected to contribute to our shared syllabus' resources and reactions as essential for active and desired course engagement.

The instructors will write to you about your engagement quarterly.

Reflective journaling, dialogue with thought partners, and weekly class dialogue. As you prepare for class discussion, think about the questions and ideas that emerge. Bring your thoughts on a complex idea. Feel free to share something in process and ill-informed, half-baked, or messy and complex. Engage, consider, contemplate, storytell, question, but do not hold forth. **We are not a community of "experts"**. As you read, you should keep a reflective journal with substantive entries and reflections about your learning and you should dialogue weekly or bi-weekly with your thought partner about the ideas in the course. Ask your partner(s) their ideas. It may be helpful to meet prior to class to dialogue about ideas. We will discuss your reflections over the time of the course in class and how dialogue contributed to your thinking. This exercise will also support the below writing contributions. Share from these activities with the class as you feel comfortable. Please enter thought partner pairs/groups here: [Antiblackness in Society and Ed Thought Partners/Groups - Google Docs](#)

⁸ Thanks, Sabina Vaught.

Semester-long Written Projects (select an option)

Please select a written project considering Afropessimism/antiblackness you feel will strengthen and/or inform your questions/interests. This can include: 1) a 10 - 12 page paper, 2) a conference proposal, 3) a book review or other writing. If selecting options 1 or 2, it is required that you engage at least 5 sources from this course. If selecting option 3, please select a book that draws upon Afropessimism and/or antiblackness. Please consider submitting your work for publication among a wide range of outlets.

Page length: Variable (depending on project)

Working draft due: 2/24

Final draft due: 4/21

Format: APA