

English 173-01: Reading Race in American Culture
Summer, 2021
M-F 1:20 pm-3:30 pm
Dr. Angelyn Mitchell
Office Hours: By appointment
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The subject of the dream is the dreamer. --Toni Morrison

I have never lived, nor has any of us, in a world in which race did not matter.
--Toni Morrison

Race has become metaphorical—a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological "race" ever was It seems that it has a utility far beyond economy, beyond the sequestering of classes from one another, and has assumed a metaphorical life so completely embedded in daily discourse that it is perhaps more necessary and more on display than ever before.
--Toni Morrison

The aim of the contemporary cultural studies investigator is not to generate another good theory, but to give a better theorized account of concrete historical reality.
--Stuart Hall

Texts

"Recitatif" (Toni Morrison, 1983)

***Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Frederick Douglass, 1845)**

***The Scarlet Letter* (Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1850)**

***The Great Gatsby* (F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1925)**

***Passing* (Nella Larsen, 1929)**

***Light in August* (William Faulkner, 1932)**

***The Street* (Ann Petry, 1945)**

(All novels are available online through Lauinger. They are also available at Internet Archive).

Films

***Death of a Salesman* (written by Arthur Miller, 1949; directed by Volker Schlöndorff, 1985)**

***A Raisin in the Sun* (written by Lorraine Hansberry, 1959; directed by Daniel Petrie, 1961))**

***The Human Stain* (written by Philip Roth, 2000; directed by Robert Benton, 2003)**

***Crash* (co-written, directed and produced by Paul Haggis, 2004)**

***Lemonade* (written, directed and produced by Beyoncé Knowles, et al, 2016)**

***Get Out* (written, directed and produced by Jordan Peele, 2017)**

***I Am Not Your Negro* (directed by Raoul Peck; written by James Baldwin and Peck, 2017)**

***Sweat* (written by Lynn Nottage, 2017)**

***When They See Us* (co-written, directed and co-produced by Ava DuVernay, 2019)**

(Most films are on Canvas.)

Course Description and Objectives

How do we read race? What interpretive protocols do we use, knowingly and unknowingly? What is the language of race? In this course, we will examine race in American

culture, specifically as constructed in texts by Anglo-American and African American writers from 1845 to the present in our quest to understand better the social and political significance race in American society. In 1903, W.E.B. DuBois wrote that the problem of the twentieth century in the United States would be race, or as he put it, “the color line.” This metaphor of linearity ironically represents the demarcating nature of race as constructed, employed, and deployed in the US. We will be particularly interested in how the symbiotic binary of black and white signifies, symbolizes and reifies social and cultural aspirations, interests and conflicts as depicted in the fiction and film.

In many ways, the history of the United States and the history of race are mutually constitutive. Consider these defining moments in American history and their relationship to race: The Revolutionary Period, The Constitutional Convention, The Declaration of Independence, the Dred Scott Decision, the Civil War, Reconstruction, The Industrial Revolution, Plessy v. Ferguson, World War One, the Harlem Renaissance, Brown v. Board of Education, World War Two, the Vietnam War, and the Civil Rights Movement. The three best selling novels in American history all deal with race in the context of American slavery: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936), and Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976). Accordingly, race is fundamental and seemingly defined and defining in US history. Constructions of race serve many social purposes, and how interpretive grids of race are constructed is as important as examining constructions of race. We will be concerned with how American writers on both sides of the historic color line construct and represent race. By pairing representative texts from nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we will explore how thematically, stylistically, politically, and culturally the narratives speak to each other. We will follow, for example, an arc that takes us, in Anglo-American literature, from the seemingly expressiveness and authority in terms of race as encoded in *The Scarlet Letter* to the lack thereof in *Light in August*, the stereotypes of race in *Crash* and the hybridity of race in *The Human Stain*. Of the African American texts, from Douglass's *Narrative* to Morrison's *A Mercy*, we will explore a move from codified physical bondage to the sociological and psychological bondages. Our primary tools of inquiry will be critical race theory (CRT), intersectionality, Black feminist theory, and performance theories.

Course Requirements and Evaluation Criteria

In addition to completing the readings and to participating in class and Canvas discussions and asynchronous activities, you are required to complete the following:

- ☞ Two papers in which you will apply CRT to readings of your choice (1200 words each)
- ☞ Weekly discussion posts and responses in Canvas
- ☞ Final project and oral exam

Course Objectives

- To introduce Critical Race Theory and its tenets and usefulness
- To introduce a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach to the study and interpretation of race in America, especially in terms of cultural productions
- To guide students in thinking critically and writing cogently about the meaning and significance of race in the US

This course may satisfy two of the GC Core Requirements: HALC and Engaging Diversity.

Course Requirements and Evaluation Criteria**Class participation and attendance: 10 points**

To earn all points, your participation in class discussions and activities must be often, consistent, plentiful, brilliant and sustained. Daily participation is required.

Two papers: 50 points

You will write two short papers (1200 words). Or you could choose to write one longer paper (2400 words.) I would like for these papers to be close readings of texts of your choice (at least one from our class). I would also like for you to have the opportunity to write these papers (or paper) in relation to your specific major or your specific interests, keeping in mind our objectives. Please feel free to pitch your paper ideas to me before you begin writing. I am not assigning a specific due date; rather, I would like to receive one by Wednesday of two of our three remaining weeks (2, 3, or 4) or the longer paper by Wednesday in week 3. In your citations, please be consistent; MLA or APA would be fine.

Discussion posts and responses (four per week): 25 points

Keeping in mind the questions and key terms from the Notes on CRT, please post twice each week your thoughts on not only the readings in class, but also your readings from beyond class if you'd like. Please also respond to two posts each week. You may do these any time, but make sure to do so before Monday of the following week.

Oral Final Exam (20 minutes): 30 points

You will have an oral final examination on the last days of class; this exam is cumulative. We will all participate in the oral examinations. Plan to be examined for 45 minutes.

Grading Scale: A (115-110); A- (109-104); B+ (103-98); B (97-92); B- (91-86); C+ (85-80); C (79-74); C- (73-68); D+ (67-62); D (61-56); F (55-0)