

RACE IN AMERICA

English 1730-130: Reading Race in America
Summer, 2025
TBD

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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)
Playing in the Dark (Toni Morrison, 1992)
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)
Critical Race Theory: An Introduction, 4th ed. (Delgado and Stephanic, 2023)

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)
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)
Leave the World Behind (directed by Sam Esmail, 2023)

Recommended

Literary Criticism: A Very Short Introduction (J. Culler, 2011)

Course Description

In 1903, W.E.B. DuBois wrote that the problem of the twentieth century would be “the color line”—his metaphor for the racial binary produced by white supremacy and racism. In this course, we will examine Anglo-American and African American texts from 1845 to 2017 to understand better the social constructions of race along “the color line” in American society. This metaphor of linearity represents the demarcating nature of race as constructed, enacted, deployed, performed, and maintained in the US, where whiteness and its privilege are the arbiters of normativity for many US institutions. We will be particularly interested in how whiteness is constructed by and is mutually constitutive with blackness. We will also examine how race defines, symbolizes, and reifies social, political, and cultural values, aspirations, interests, and conflicts as depicted in literary and cultural texts. Despite our understanding of intersecting identities, this color line, as history reveals, informs the terms of engagement for all identities in US life.

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 Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Dred Scott Decision, the Civil War, Reconstruction, the Industrial Revolution, Plessy v. Ferguson, World War I, the Harlem Renaissance, Brown v. Board of Education, World War II, and the Civil Rights Movement. Slavery, of course, is an overarching aspect of the American narrative. In American literature, three best-selling novels all deal with race in the context of slavery: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936), and Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976). Race, then, is fundamental in US history and central to its culture. Race serves many political and social purposes in American society. Examining how race is constructed and interpreted through its cultural productions is important in understanding its meaning and significance. We will be concerned with American cultural productions on both sides of “the color line” and how they contribute to defining and understanding race. By pairing representative texts from nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we will explore how they thematically, stylistically, politically, and culturally speak to each other and to their readers/viewers, especially at the intersections of gender, class, sexuality, and culture. Our primary tools of inquiry will be critical race theory (CRT), intersectionality, Black feminist theory, new historicism, and performance studies.

While reading, please consider:

- How do we read race? What strategies are used to construct race?
- What interpretive protocols or strategies do we use when reading race?
- How does race inform culture, and how does culture inform race?
- What is the relationship between race and the creative imagination?
- How is race constructed by Anglo-American writers? By African American writers?
- What are the politics surrounding the construction and the interpretation of race?
- What is the relationship between national and racial identities in the US?
- What are truly American themes?
- Are there new interpretive grids for reading race in the twenty-first century?
- How does intersectionality (race, gender, region, class or sexuality) inform the interpretation of race?





Course Objectives Goals

- to understand how American literary and cultural texts/productions may encode, reinforce, subvert, advance, or interrogate racialized identities and ideologies
- to deconstruct racial constructions, especially the constructions of White and Black identities, to reveal the social, cultural, and political import embedded in the constructions;
- to think, speak, and write critically and cogently about race and its significance in American life and culture

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

Course Requirements

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

-  Class Participation and Discussion Posts
-  Playlist Assignment with essay
-  Field Observation Essay
-  Oral Final Examination

1. Class and discussion board participation (50 points)

To earn all points, your participation in class discussions and activities must be often, consistent, plentiful, brilliant and sustained. Keeping in mind the questions and key terms from our readings and class discussion, please post twice each week your thoughts on the texts in our class. Your posts should present a selected quotation from the text, offer analysis or close reading of the quotation, and pose a question about the readings/viewings which you also answer. You may also include your readings from beyond our class as examples in your posts. Additionally, please respond to one posted question each week. All should be completed by Wednesdays at 9 pm (EST).

2. Playlist Assignment with essay (25 points)

For this assignment, you will curate a playlist of at least 10 songs that you think essential to understanding race in the US. The possibilities include music from the novels or the films or from their settings, music that anticipates or speaks to considerations of race, music that illuminates how race is read or viewed in the US. You should also write an essay (1100-1400 words) explaining your selection criteria and how the music you selected is useful in the context of our course. For example, how does each song help us to understand the significance of race in our society? Feel free to explicate the lyrics or read the instrumentation. Remember to cite all primary and secondary sources you consult or quote, using current MLA in-text citations and remember to include a works cited page, including the songs. Playlist is due May 31, 2024, by 6:00 pm (ET). Submit on Canvas.

3. Field Observation Essay (25 points)

For this assignment, you are to select a public site (e.g., cafe/restaurant, museum, public

transportation, office, mall) where you can spend at least two hours and during that time, you are to observe—read race, if you will—in your setting. You might want to complete your field work at least a week before the due date. You will write an essay of 1400-1500 words. Questions to consider as you write about your observation: what is the racial makeup of the site you have selected? How does it change in the time you are there? Who racially occupies/patronizes your chosen site? What are the intersections of race and class that you observe? Race and gender? If we remember our reading and discussion of Douglass's *Narrative* and Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* and their less conventional identifiers of race, what does your site reveal in less obvious ways about race in America. Remember to take notes as you observe so that you can write the essay explaining how this assignment allowed you to extend your learning from our class. Field Observation Essay is due on June 7, 2024, by 6 pm (ET). Submit on Canvas.

4. Oral Final Exam (50 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, and all students will be asked to submit potential examination questions a week in advance. Plan on 15-20 minutes of examination. Review this list of broad topics/themes we will have covered that the oral exam questions may engage: race in early America, race in early 20th-century America, race at mid 20th-century America, race in 21st-century America, intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality, slavery, freedom, perception, race as construction and as lived experience, community, family, society, education, racial capitalism, passing, stereotypes, and labor. Your job will be to answer questions textually correctly, with specificity and insight. Specifically, students should:

- 1-demonstrate with textual examples how American literary and cultural texts/productions may encode, reinforce, subvert, advance, or interrogate racialized identities and ideologies;
- 2-deconstruct racial constructions, especially the constructions of White and Black identities, to reveal the social, cultural, and political meanings embedded in the constructions;
- 3-think and speak critically, cogently, and insightfully about race and its significance in American life and culture

Grading Scale

A: 150-145
 A-: 144-141
 B+: 140-137
 B: 136-132
 B-: 131-128
 C+: 127 -124
 C: 123-119
 C-: 118-115
 D+: 114-111
 D: 110-105
 F: 104-0

COURSE SCHEDULE

This course begins with an Orientation and is divided into four weeks. We will meet three times during each week on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. You are to complete the readings and class assignments listed on Tuesdays and Thursdays for discussion when we meet. Students are required to move through each week in sequential order. Summer school courses, and especially pre-session courses, are very condensed. We are covering in four weeks material for a three-

credit course that is more spaced in a traditional semester. You should plan carefully how you will successfully complete the requirements of this course.

May

Week 1: Theorizing Race and Race in Early America

20 Introduction

21 "Recitatif" (Morrison); *Playing in the Dark*, chapters 1-2

22 *I Am Not Your Negro*; *Playing in the Dark*, chapter 3; *Critical Race Theory*, chapters 1-3

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

24 Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)

Week 2: Writing Race: the Jazz Age, the Harlem Renaissance, and mid- 20th Century America

27 Holiday

28 Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925); *Critical Race Theory*, chapters 4-5

29 Larsen, *Passing* (1929)

30 Faulkner, *Light in August* (1932)

31 Petry, *The Street* (1946)

June

Week 3: Reading Performances of Race

3 Discussion Day; *Critical Race Theory*, chapters 6-7

4 *Death of a Salesman* (1949)

5 *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959)

6 *The Human Stain* (2003)

7 *Crash* (2004)

Week 4: Reading and Performing Race in the 21st-century America

10 *Get Out* (2017); *Critical Race Theory*, chapter 8

11 *Leave the World Behind* (2023)

12 Summaries of Field Observation Papers

13 Oral examinations

14 Oral examinations