

ETHN 280 Winter 2015
Black Thought: Roots and Routes
Tuesdays 9:30am-12:20pm, Social Science Building Rm. 103

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“Like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel—from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another. Cultural and intellectual life are usually nourished and often sustained by this circulation of ideas, and whether it takes the form of acknowledged or unconscious influence, creative borrowing, or wholesale appropriation, the movement of ideas and theories from one place to another is both a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity.”

Edward Said, “Travelling Theory,” *The World, The Text, and the Critic*

Overview:

The aim of this course is to develop a general reading knowledge of the traditions, contexts, and trajectories of research in Black intellectual discourse. Structured both thematically and chronologically, this course takes a broad conceptualization of Black intellectual history as it explores both major currents in Black thought and some paths less tread. We will read several well known and lesser known texts that represent suggestive and provocative modes of engaging Black intellectual and cultural works and workers. In some ways this course comprises a sociology or archaeology of knowledge and other ways it traces continuities and discontinuities between communities of thought and representation and the institutional means of producing knowledge by and about Black people.

Caveat:

It is essential for all students in the seminar to familiarize themselves with the various historical/genealogical contexts wherein Black/African Diasporic intellectual discourse has been crafted. To that end, each student should assemble a set of reference texts, when necessary and relevant, be they textbooks, encyclopedia, or scholarly review articles such as those drawn from *Reviews in American History*, *American Quarterly*, *Callaloo*, *African American Review*, and/or *Transition*. A particularly useful and capacious textbook is Robin D.G. Kelley and Earl Lewis’s *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans* (Oxford, 2000).

Please also take a moment to read the following brief pieces on approaches to scholarly criticism:

(1) John Updike’s Rules for Constructive Criticism

<http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/05/john-updikes-6-rules-for-constructive-criticism/256643/>

(2) Roland Barthes, "Blind and Dumb Criticism," in *Mythologies* (New York: The Noonday Press, [1957]), 33-34.

Reading Schedule:

Week 1—Introducing Black Intellectual Discourse

- William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, "The study of the negro problems," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 11 (1) (January 1898): 1-23.
- Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Cultural Critique*, No. 6, The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse (Spring, 1987), 51-63.
- Cornel West, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference" in Trinh Minh Ha, et. al., eds. *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1991), 19-36.
- B. Anthony Bogues, "The Full Has Never Been Told: Heresy, Prophecy, Praxis, and the Black Radical Political Intellectual" in *Black Heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 1-22.
- Recommended: James A. Snead, "On Repetition in Black Culture." *Black American Literature Forum* 15.4 (1981): 146-54; Lewis R. Gordon, "Du Bois's Humanistic Philosophy of Human Sciences," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 568, (Mar., 2000), 265-280; David Scott. "Introduction: On the Archaeologies of Black Memory." *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): v-xvi.

Week 2—"What is Africa to Me?"

- Countee Cullen, "Heritage," in *Color* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1925).
- Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).
- Recommended: St. Clair Drake, *Redemption of Africa and Black Religion* (Third World Press, 1970); Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998); James T. Campbell, *Middle Passages: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787–2005* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006).

Week 3—Death and Social Death: The Case of New World Chattel Slavery

- Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

- Orlando Patterson, Preface and Introduction to *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), vii-14.
- Stanley Elkins, "Slavery and Personality," in *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (New York: The Universal Library, Grosset and Dunlap, 1959), 81-139.
- Supplemental: Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Culture and Countermemory: The "American" Connection (Summer, 1987), 64-81; Sara Clarke Kaplan, "Love and Violence/Maternity and Death: Black Feminism and the Politics of Reading (Un)Representability," *Black Women, Gender + Families*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring 2007), 94-124.

Week 4—Gender, Sexuality, Class and the Politics of Black Racial Destiny, 1877-1930

- Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
- Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "The Politics of Respectability," in *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 185-230.
- Supplemental: Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., "Exodus, Race, and the Politics of Nation" and "Race, Nation, and the Ideology of Chosenness," in *Exodus: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 44-81; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* Vol. 17, No. 2 (Winter, 1992): 251-274.

Week 5—The Black Atlantic and the Uses of Diaspora

- Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).
- Paul Gilroy, "Preface" and "The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity" *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), ix-40.
- Supplemental: Tiffany Ruby Patterson & Robin D. G. Kelley, "Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World," *African Studies Review*, 43, no. 1, Special Issue on the Diaspora. (Apr., 2000): 11-45.

Week 6—Race, Nation, and Democracy in the "American Century"

- Read each twice. → Ralph Ellison, Editorials, *The Negro Quarterly*, (Summer 1942 and Winter 1943).
- Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

Skim the following:

- Gabriel N. Mendes, “‘This Burden of Consciousness’: Richard Wright and the ‘Psychology of Race Relations,’ 1927-1947” in *A Deeper Science: Harlem’s Lafargue Clinic and the Promise of Antiracist Psychiatry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, Forthcoming), 30-77.
- Dayo F. Gore, “In Defense of Black Womanhood: Race, Gender, Class and the Politics of Interracial Solidarity,” in *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women in the Cold War* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 46-73.
- Cynthia A. Young, “Angela Y. Davis and the U.S. Third World Left Theory and Praxis” in *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third Left* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 184-208.
- Supplemental: Claudia Jones, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!” (1949) in *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: An African American Anthology*. Second Edition (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), 316-326; LeRoi Jones, *Home: Social Essays* (New York: William Morrow & Co., Inc., 1966); Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans: Black Experience & American Culture; or Some Alternatives to the Folklore of White Supremacy* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1970); Charles Johnson, “The End of the Black American Narrative,” *The American Scholar* (June 18, 2008).

Week 7—Queer of Color Critique and the Future of Black Studies

- Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004)
- Rinaldo Walcott, “Outside in Black Studies: Reading from a Queer Place in the Diaspora,” in Johnson and Henderson, eds., *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 90-105.

Week 8—Whose Black Radical Tradition?

- Fred Moten, *In the Break: the Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
- Cedric Robinson, “The Historical Archaeology of the Black Radical Tradition” and “The Nature of the Black Radical Tradition,” in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, [2000 ed.]), 121-171.
- Supplemental:
T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *The Sacred Wood* (1921) [<http://www.bartleby.com/200/sw4.html>]

Week 9—Afro-Pessimism and the Limits of Relationality

- Frank B. Wilderson, III, *Red, White, & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

- Recommended: Frank B. Wilderson, III, “The Prison Slave as Hegemony’s (Silent) Scandal,” *Social Justice*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2003), 18-27; Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2003): 11–40.

Week 10—“L’experience vecue du Noir”

- Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated from the French by Richard Philcox. (New York: Grove Press, 2008 [1952]).
- W.E.B. Du Bois, “Forethought” and “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” in *The Souls of Black Folk* (Pocket Books, 2005 [1903]).
- Anna Julia Cooper, “What Are We Worth?” in *A Voice From the South* (Xenia, Ohio: The Aldine Printing House, 1892).
- Recommended: G.W.F. Hegel, “Lordship and Bondage,” in *The Phenomenology of Mind* ([1808]1977), 228-40; Lewis R. Gordon, “Fanon, Philosophy, and Racism,” in *Her Majesty’s Other Children: Sketches of Racism in a Neocolonial Age* (Lanham, MD and Oxford, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997), 25-50.

Supplemental: Ronald A.T. Judy, “Fanon’s Body of Black Experience,” in Gordon, Sharpley-Whiting, and White, eds., *Fanon: A Critical Reader* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 53-73.

Evaluation Criteria

Presence and Participation	30%
Critical Reading Commentaries	30%
Annotated Bibliography	10%
Seminar Paper	30%

Presence and Participation: Each student is required to attend every session of the course. In the case of absence, you must write a 750-100 word analytic review of the text(s) under consideration, modeled on the type of critical book review found in a scholarly journal.

You should come to each session as though you were responsible for leading the discussion of the text(s) for that day. For each session, you should come with detailed notes and questions on the text(s) we will be discussing and be prepared to comment verbally on them, as well as be ready to discuss the written and spoken comments of your classmates. Since presence and participation comprises one-third of your grade for the course it is imperative that you contribute to each session by sharing your informed interpretation of the material and/or by posing questions that might guide our investigation of the topics and text(s) for that week.

Critical Reading Commentaries: Each week you will provide a written critical reflection of 200-300 words in response to the weekly readings, to be shared with all members of the seminar. Your written commentaries are meant both to encourage careful

reflection prior to each class and to be generative for seminar discussion. The commentaries must be submitted to the course TED page by **12pm each Monday** and each student is responsible for having read and considered the commentaries of the other seminar participants.

The commentaries must be analytical rather than descriptive, critically engaging the primary argument(s) of week's readings rather than a summary. **Each commentary will receive a mark of either Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory:** a Satisfactory critical reading commentary presents an analysis of some key aspect of the text illuminating its relevance to Black intellectual discourse.

The word *analysis* in Greek meant *to loosen up*; so I take that to mean analysis loosens up the topic/phenomena under discussion into parts that are significant to the working of the whole thing. It's then our task to explain why the parts we loosened up are significant to the whole. Ask yourself whether you've moved beyond defining the topic and related concepts and terminology, beyond describing what others have said about the topic, to providing your own interpretation of the topic/issue/evidence under consideration. Your interpretation must be substantiated through reference to our readings.

A useful prompt is: Start declarative; go narrative.

Each paragraph in your commentary should follow this general structure:

Claim→Evidence→Significance

An example from my own work:

“Social and behavioral scientists’ focus on the pathological makeup of black people—their behavior, their culture, their social structure—was not new in the early postwar years. In the four decades prior to the Second World War, however, there had been a profound shift in the way the human sciences considered what was then named the Negro Problem. During the 19th century and even into the early 20th century, the Negro Problem was thought of in biological terms as the Negro’s inability to adapt to the white man’s superior civilization. But by the start of the 20th century, anthropologists and sociologists such as Franz Boas and W.E.B. Du Bois began to frame supposedly racially-determined, hence biologically-determined, differences among human populations as the result of the contingencies of history and culture, rather than ordained by God or fixed by the hand of nature. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this new way of thinking about human variation. By the end of World War II, social scientific thought and research on African Americans focused not on the bio-racial but on the psychological and cultural obstacles to full immersion, assimilation, and integration into American society.”

Seminar Paper: Choose ONE of the following and write a fifteen-page critical analysis of any aspect of the text using at least five sources from the assigned reading of this course:

Jean Toomer, *Cane* (1923)

Ann Petry, *The Street* (1946)
Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)
James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953)
George Lamming, *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953)
Paule Marshall, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959)
Le Roi Jones, *The Dutchman* (1964)
Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970)
Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972)
Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day* (1988)

Annotated Bibliography: Please identify five to seven books or articles on the text you choose for the critical essay. You will write a paragraph for each source you choose, explicating its significance to contemporary scholarly discussions of your text.