

Racism in American Literature

ENGL 1260W.13, Fall 2016 | MWF, 9:10am-10am | Calhoun 204

ENGL 1260W.15, Fall 2016 | MWF, 3:10pm-4pm | Calhoun 203

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This course challenges the persistent idea that the source and solution of racism is solely affective and individual. Instead, we will pursue through literature, film, philosophy, and theory the idea that racism conditions a number of governing institutions and systems. To question anti-black racism as not just a structure of feeling, but a constitutive structure of American life, we must ask questions about capitalism, criminal justice, politics, and even the ways of knowing and being in the world. Because many of these ideas challenge many common-sense understandings of anti-black racism in the U.S. and abroad, students will learn to write and support controversial arguments about the relationship of literature and culture to essential social issues. We will read texts by Angela Davis, Ta-Nahesi Coates, James Baldwin, Ida B. Wells, Claudia Rankine and Fred Moten among many others. Ultimately we will seek solutions in literature and culture for an ongoing critical dilemma: the inability to broadly acknowledge the systemic and structural aspects that condition anti-black racism in the twenty-first century.

Required Texts

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (Spiegel & Grau, 2015) ISBN: 9780812993547

James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (Vintage, 1992), ISBN: 9780679744726

Richard Wright, *Native Son* (Harper Perennial, 2008), ISBN: 9780061148507

Toni Morrison, *Sula* (Vintage, 2004), ISBN: 9781400033430

These books are available for purchase at the Vanderbilt Bookstore. You can buy them elsewhere, but make sure you're buying the editions listed above. The books are also on reserve at Central Library.

All other course readings will be posted on our course website. Always print out a hard copy of assigned electronic readings to bring to class, unless instructed otherwise.

REQUIREMENTS AND ASSIGNMENTS

Grade Distribution

Participation	20%
Group Presentation	20%
Responses	20%
Papers	40%

Papers

You will write and submit three papers of 4-5 pages in length that assert and support an academic argument about assigned course texts. One of these papers must be a revision of one of your previous papers in the class. Submitting a revision, therefore, will be an option for the second or third paper assignment. All paper assignments will ask you to analyze one or two course texts in relation to the themes of the course. For the first paper assignment, I will provide prompts, but for subsequent assignments you will be responsible for developing your own topic. More details about paper assignments will be distributed as they approach. For now, know that you will be graded on your ability to develop a coherent argument that is related to course texts and topics. By coherent argument, I mean that your major claims are well supported with textual evidence and that your writing is easily understood.

Responses

You will write four response papers. Response papers will be 1 single-spaced page in length and will be submitted at the end of a class period in hard copy. You can turn in your responses at any time in the semester, but you can never submit more than one response per class period. Your response should engage with the text(s) that we read for a given class, either on their own, or in conversation with other works that we have read. You should always be referring to particular passages of texts in your responses and should cite those references parenthetically in the text.

Responses are a great place to pursue questions that you might want to discuss with your classmates, to develop a close reading for a paper, or to make more sense of a difficult passage. In other words, responses are an opportunity to work on grounding your thinking in what you've read and to consider how that thinking connects to larger issues that are of interest to you. Your responses will be graded on a scale of check, check plus, and check minus. I will not accept revisions to responses, unless they are radically altered. I will, however, accept more than four responses, in which case I will take your four highest grades.

Group Presentation

In a group of two or three, you will conduct an in-class conversation about the day's assigned reading and contemporary issues related to race and racism. The conversation will last 10-15 minutes. Your conversation will draw our attention to moments in the readings that resonate with current events. The presentation will lead into a class conversation about the text and the events or issues it raises for your group. As such, your presentation must provide well-researched context for our discussion. Practically, this means you will need to research the text you discuss, its writer, and the events/issues that you see intersecting with the text.

The night before the presentation your group will submit to me via email the following things: a short (3-4 sentences) statement of what your presentation will be about, a list of no less than four questions that you will discuss with each other, one discussion question that you will ask the class at the conclusion of your presentation, a list of the major passages of texts you will

discuss, and a brief description of how you divided the labor of the presentation. I have included some examples of what this document should look like on Blackboard.

This assignment is designed to get you talking, researching, and thinking about the relevance of what we do in the classroom to the world outside of it. Doing so requires you to interact with members of our community and not just consider these questions in isolation. You will be graded on the rigor of your conversation, your group's pre-presentation document, and the ability of your conversation to provoke a wider class discussion.

Participation

This is a discussion-based course, so come to class prepared to be an active member of the discussion. To be an active member of discussion, you'll need to come to class with a firm grasp of the assigned readings, questions you have about the material, and respect for the comments and questions of your classmates.

Conferences

You are required to meet with me one-on-one once this semester to discuss the course or your writing. I strongly encourage you, however, to meet with me more often. Drop in during my office hours or, make an appointment with me. Don't stand me up, especially when you make an appointment outside of office hours – doing so counts as an absence.

POLICIES

Attendance

Come to every class on time with the assigned readings and note-taking materials. More than three unexcused absences will adversely affect your overall course grade. Arriving late or not bringing your text to class will also count against you. If you know you will be absent in advance for a university sanctioned reason, contact me ahead of time.

Deadlines

All assignments must be turned in by announced deadlines. If this does not seem possible for a particular assignment, you should contact me well in advance so we can come up with a solution.

Screens

I ask that you not use computers, tablets, cell phones, or any other electronic devices during class. Since you won't be using these items, they should be put away during class time. You will be notified of occasional exceptions to this policy.

Email

Email is the best way to schedule an appointment with me or to ask me questions about the course material. Sometimes – especially near paper deadlines – it may take me more than 24 hours to get back to you, so plan accordingly. I prefer you to use professional email etiquette,

meaning that you use salutations, punctuation, and complete sentences. An emoji every now and again won't hurt anyone, though.

The Writing Studio

Your writing will benefit from a visit to the Writing Studio. Writing Studio consultants can help you with all aspects of academic writing at any stage of the writing process. I know, because I take my writing there. Make an appointment at one of their two locations – in 1801 Edgehill or the Ingram Commons – by using their online scheduler. (vanderbilt.edu/writing)

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is a serious transgression and, as such, cases of plagiarism will be handed over to the Honor Council. That said, plagiarism can be difficult to define. Be rigorous about citing any sources you consult while working on assignments for this class. If you have questions about what is and isn't plagiarism, please don't hesitate to ask me. For more about academic integrity at Vanderbilt visit vanderbilt.edu/academicintegrity.

SCHEDULE

Week 1	<u>Introductions</u>
W, 8/24:	Introductions
F, 8/26:	W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Black Worker" and "The White Worker" [online]
Week 2	<u>What is racism and how does race stem from it?</u>
M, 8/29:	Karen Fields and Barbara Fields, "Introduction" from <i>Racecraft</i> [online]
W, 8/31:	Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "The Strange Enigma of Race in Contemporary America" [online]
F, 9/2:	Sara Ahmed, "Speaking about Racism" [online]
Week 3	<u>Describing the present - I</u>
M, 9/5:	Ta-Nehisi Coates, <i>Between the World and Me</i> ; Robin D.G. Kelley and Ta-Nehisi Coates in conversation at the Los Angeles Public Library [video, online]
W, 9/7:	<i>Between the World and Me</i> (cont.)
F, 9/9:	<i>Between the World and Me</i> (cont.)
Week 4	<u>Describing the present - II</u>
M, 9/12:	<i>Between the World and Me</i> (cont.)
W, 9/14:	<i>Between the World and Me</i> (cont.)
F, 9/16:	June Jordan, "Report from the Bahamas" [online]
Week 5	<u>Describing the present – III</u>
M, 9/19:	James Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time"
W, 9/21:	James Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time"

- F, 9/23: *Baldwin's N*— [film, online]
- Week 6
 M, 9/26: Is there racial justice in criminal justice? - I
 Angela Davis, "The Prison-Industrial Complex" [online]
 W, 9/28: Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* [online]
 F, 9/30: Writing Workshop
- Week 7
 M, 10/3: Is there racial justice in criminal justice? - II
 Ida B. Wells, "Lynch Law in America" [online]; Claude McKay, "The Lynching"
 W, 10/5: Class Cancelled; Nicholas Mirzoeff, "The Murder of Michael Brown: Reading the Ferguson Grand Jury Transcript"; Mark Greif, "Seeing Through Police"
 F, 10/7: Class Cancelled; **Paper 1 Due**
- Week 8:
 M, 10/10: Is there racial justice in criminal justice? - III
 Claudia Rankine, *Citizen* [excerpts]
 W, 10/12: Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, "Michael Brown" [online]; Robin D.G. Kelley and Fred Moten in conversation [video, online]; Kendrick Lamar, "Alright" [video, online]; Beyoncé, "Formation" [video, online]
 F, 10/14: No class, fall break
- Week 9:
 M, 10/17: Representing Racism - I
 Richard Wright, *Native Son*
 W, 10/19: *Native Son* (cont.)
 F, 10/21: *Native Son* (cont.)
- Week 10:
 M, 10/24: Representing Racism - II
Native Son (cont.)
 W, 10/26: *Native Son* (cont.)
 F, 10/28: *Native Son* (cont.)
- Week 11:
 M, 10/31: Representing Racism - III
 Class Cancelled
 W, 11/2: *Native Son* (cont.)
 F, 11/4: **Paper 2 Due; Native Son** (cont.)
- Week 12:
 M, 11/7: Debt, Dispossession, and the Domestic - I
 Toni Morrison, *Sula*; VOTE TOMORROW
 W, 11/9: *Sula* (cont.)
 F, 11/11: *Sula* (cont.)
- Week 13: Debt, Dispossession, and the Domestic - II

M, 11/14: *Sula* (cont.)
W, 11/16: *Sula* (cont.)
F, 11/18: Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" [online]; "The Combahee River Collective Statement" [online]

Thanksgiving Break

Week 14: Conclusions
M, 11/28: Coates, "The Case for Reparations"
W, 11/30: Robin D.G. Kelley, "Black Study, Black Struggle"
F, 12/2: Conferences/Writing Workshop

Week 15:
M, 12/5: Conferences/Writing Workshop
W, 12/7: **Paper 3 Due**