

Fictions of Whiteness

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Office Hours: Wednesday 4.30PM-6.30PM (Barker 105)

Course Description

Reflecting on the character of racism on Charlie Rose's talk show in 1993, Toni Morrison had a question to ask of 'white' people. "If I take your race away, and there you are, all strung out... all you got is your little self, and what is that? What are you without racism? Are you any good? Are you still strong? Are you still smart? Do you still like yourself?" she said, describing how little curiosity there has been into how racism affects its perpetrators. "If you can only be tall because somebody is on their knees, then you have a serious problem," she continued. Three decades on, that question still asks for answers, though many scholars, authors and artists have made significant inroads. How have colonialism, slavery, apartheid, the shoah, islamophobia, a catalogue of systemic racialized violence too long to ennumerate here, how have these forces affected 'white' people?

This transhistorical course considers the making of the 'white' race. What does it mean to be white? Race is understood to be a social construct, but how does it take place? Is the ongoing investigation of whiteness a productive line of inquiry, or another identity industry? Whiteness studies is a well-established field of inquiry which has nevertheless made only scant distance in the domain of literary inquiry. Canonical theorists such as Theodore Allen and David Roediger have thought about how racial categories historically entrench the claims of certain citizens, and how persistent identities have been whittled out of this system of preferentialism; less headway has been made in theorizing the social and aesthetic experience of whiteness and the shifting history of its cultural formation. Over the course of the semester, through familiar and unfamiliar works within a long frame – from *The Tempest* to Dana Schutz – we will: develop critical understanding of discourses to do with privilege, shame, guilt and identity; become acquainted with new modes of reading and analysis to unite issues of aesthetics and artistic form with social, historical and political questions; consider how 'black' identities and cultural forms have navigated the tyranny of white supremacy and racial thinking, or not; and think about the material and psychological formation of race, across media but above all in literature, at the junction of cultural, political and economic forces.

Course Objectives

- Understand how whiteness operates as an ethical, aesthetic, legal, and symbolic category
- Write a sophisticated, informed, insightful work of researched cultural criticism
- Learn how to identify and engage with criticism and theory related to cultural works
- Develop research skills to write an argument for a long-form paper of 20-25 pages

Assignments

1. **Short paper:** Due in week four of the semester, this is a 5-7 page paper which chooses an excerpt from a text we've so far encountered, pairing it with a literary-critical-historical approach in order to read it closely.
2. **2-page prospectus and annotated bibliography:** Due in late October (date tbc) this prospectus would cover 10-15 critical readings to ground and orientate you on the way to your final paper.
3. **Full draft of a final paper:** Due two weeks before the final paper, this longer paper will be returned with comments to help you with revisions for the final thing.
4. **Final paper:** Due in week thirteen of the semester, you will be expected to submit a final paper of 20-25 pages which analyzes the work of 'whiteness' in the domain of culture, with the use of our critical approaches to ground and substantiate this reading, incorporating comments and feedback.
5. **Short mini-assignments:** Over the course of the semester you will be expected to prepare short assignments on readings covered that week, whether providing feedback to fellow students formulating their ideas, workshopping writing, or generating discussions on set texts.

Grade Breakdown:

- Final paper: 50%
- Final paper draft: 10%
- Prospectus and annotated bibliography: 10%
- Short paper: 10%
- Participation and preparation: 20%
- Weekly course meetings: mandatory with one free pass

Course Texts

Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (Arden, ISBN: 9781408133477)
 Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (Oxford World's Classics, ISBN: 1425053505)
 Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Penguin Modern Classics, ISBN: 9780141441672)
 Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (Vintage, ISBN: 9780099282198)
 Toni Morrison, *Recitatif* (available online or Vintage, ISBN: 9781784744786)
 Nella Larsen, *Passing* (Penguin, ISBN: 9780143129424)
 James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (Penguin, ISBN: 9780141186351)
 Claudia Rankine, *The White Card: A Play* (Macmillan, ISBN: 9781555978396)

Critical Readings (*Most critical readings are available online or in libraries, and I will be providing a selection of photocopies over the duration of the course, but please do buy the following:*)

W.E.B. DuBois, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (ISBN: 978-1784787752)
 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (ISBN: 978-0141187426)
 Theodore Allen, *The Invention of the White Race* (ISBN: 978-1844677696)
 Richard Dyer, *White* (ISBN: 978-1138683044)
 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness & the Literary Imagination* (ISBN: 978-0674673779)

Please note: readings marked with an asterisk are optional

Part One: Base: Formations of Whiteness

1. Whiteness as Critical Paradigm

Theodore Allen, *The Invention of the White Race* (1975)
 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Introduction (1978)
 Stuart Hall, “The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media,” (1981) (Canvas)
 David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness* (1991)
 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness & the Literary Imagination* (1992)
 Richard Dyer, *White* (1997)

Assignment: select one of these introductory texts and outline its argument for the class. Think about your own relationship to whiteness, and prepare to talk about why you chose this tutorial.

2. Whiteness and Modernity

Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (1610-11)

Secondary:

Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (2018)
 (Canvas, excerpts)
 Cord Whitaker, *Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking* (2019) (Canvas, excerpts)
 Paul Gilroy, Tanner Lectures on Human Values, [I: Suffering & Inhumanity](#) (2014)
 *Philip Crispin, ‘A Tempestuous Translation: Aimé Césaire’s *Une Tempête*’ (2010)

3. Whiteness and Property

Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)

Secondary:

Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume One: Part VIII: Primitive Accumulation:
[Chapter Twenty-Six: The Secret of Primitive Accumulation](#) (1867)
 Hegel, ‘Lordship and Bondage,’ *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) (Canvas)
 Nell Irving Painter, *The History of White People* (2012) (Canvas, excerpt)
 *Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*, Introduction (1983) (Canvas, excerpt)
 *Roxann Wheeler, “My Savage, My Man: Racial Multiplicity in Robinson Crusoe”

Assignment: Come to class with a short précis of an argument belonging to one of the critical authors we have so far encountered. You should be able to: summarize their key points, characterize their style, and imagine how you would apply it to a text. You may want this to be a critical argument that will be useful for your close reading or longer paper.



4. Whiteness and Empire

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899)

Rudyard Kipling, 'The White Man's Burden' (1899) (Canvas, excerpts)

Secondary:

Gayatri Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism'

*Maya Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch* (2017) (Canvas)

Stuart Hall, *The West and the Rest* (1992) (Canvas)

5. White Supremacy

Atlanta, Season 3 (2022)

Stuart Hall and Maggie Steed, [It Aint Half Racist Mum!](#), Channel Four (1979) (Youtube)

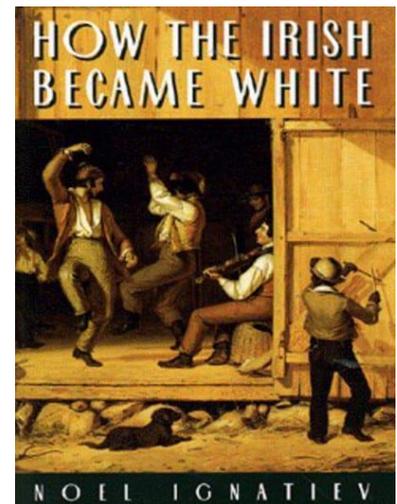
Secondary:

W.E.B. DuBois, 'The Souls of White Folk,' *Darkwater* (1920)

*Lothrop Stoddard, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* (1920) (Canvas, excerpts)

Ian Frazier, '[When W. E. B. Du Bois Made a Laughingstock of a White Supremacist](#),' *New Yorker* (2019)

*Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (1995) (Canvas, excerpts)



Assignment: short paper due: a paper of 5-7 pages is due by Friday at 5pm, which will be followed by a short conference with me over the next week to discuss your writing and begin planning for the final 20-25 page paper. In your short paper you should choose an excerpt from a text we've so far encountered, pairing it with a literary-critical-historical approach in order to read it closely.

Part Two: Superstructure: Whiteness and Identity

6. Whiteness and Vision

Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929)

Peter Paul Rubens, 'Venus at the Mirror,' (1613-4) 'Bathsheba at the Fountain' (1653)

Gustave Courbet, 'The Bathers' (1853)

Secondary:

Adrian Piper, 'Passing for White, Passing for Black' (1992) (Canvas)

Werner Sollors, 'Passing; or, Sacrificing a Parvenu' (1997) (Canvas)

*Laura Brownson, *The Rachel Divide*, Netflix (2018)

Cora Gilroy-Ware, *The Classical Body in Romantic Britain* (2020) (Canvas, excerpt)

*Margaret Talbot, 'Myth of Whiteness in Classical Sculpture,' *New Yorker* (2018)

Stuart Hall, *The Fateful Triangle*, Lecture One (1994) (Canvas)

In-class library visit: in preparation for your research paper and to help with producing the prospectus and annotated bibliography, we will take a trip to Widener Library and meet with Research Librarian Odile Harter, who will orientate you with respect to planning and refining your area of study. Since we are selecting topics for final papers over the next week, you should come to class prepared to discuss your final paper idea with the other members of the class and with a sense of what the lay of the land is like in terms of critical/theoretical approaches.

7. Whiteness and Sexuality

James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (1956)

Secondary:

James Baldwin, 'On Being White and Other Lies' (1984)

Veronica T. Watson, *The Souls of White Folk: African American Writers Theorize Whiteness* (2013) (Canvas, excerpt)

*Julian B. Carter, *The Heart of Whiteness: Normal Sexuality and Race in America, 1880-1940* (2007) (Canvas, excerpts)

8. Whiteness and Feminism

Toni Morrison, "Recitatif" (1983)

Secondary:

Zadie Smith, '[The Genius of Toni Morrison's Only Short Story](#)' *New Yorker* (2022)

bell hooks, 'Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination' (1987)

*Hazel Carby, 'White Woman Listen!' (1997)

*Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color" (1991) (Canvas)

Assignment: two-page prospectus due: In advance of your final full-length research paper, you should create a two-page outline of your subject and argument, complete with an annotated bibliography of 8-10 sources. Your argument should intervene in a debate, that is it should entail a detailed, analytical engagement with one of these works, and your prospectus should summarize their argument in brief. Students should be prepared to share their argument and prospectus with other members of the tutorial.

9. Whiteness and Instability

Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (2000)

Norman Mailer, 'The White Negro' (1957)

Secondary:

- Asad Haider, '[White Purity](#),' *Viewpoint* (2017) (Canvas, excerpts)
- Peggy MacIntosh 'White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack' (1989) (Canvas, excerpts)
- *Laura Marsh, '[Philip Roth's Revenge Fantasy](#),' *The New Republic* (2021)
- *Eric Arnesen, 'Whiteness and the Historian's Imagination' (2001)
- Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (1998) (Canvas, excerpts)

No assignment this week – please focus on your draft paper.

Assignment: draft paper due: please submit a draft version of your final full-length paper. I will return this with comments and suggestions and will as usual be available to meet before next week's meeting so you are prepared to begin revising and editing the essay over the remainder of the next four weeks of the semester for submission after the final week of class.

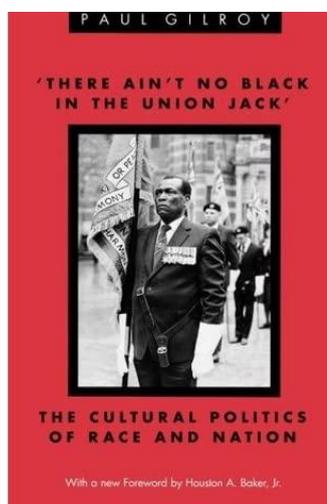
10. Whiteness, Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia

- T.S. Eliot, 'Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar' (1920)
- Ezra Pound, 'Sestina: Altaforte' (1909)
- Mohsin Hamid, '[The Face in the Mirror](#),' from *The Last White Man* (2022)

Secondary:

- *Louis Menand, 'T.S. Eliot and Antisemitism' (1996) (Canvas)
- *Zygmunt Bauman, 'Modernity, Racism, Extermination' (1991) (Canvas)
- Etienne Balibar, '[Racism, Anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia](#)' (2021)
- Werner Sollors, 'The Invention of Ethnicity' (1989) (Canvas)
- Enzo Traverso, '[Islamophobia, 'Islam-leftism', \(post\)fascism](#)' (2021)
- *Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of its Enemies* (2005) (Canvas, intro)

Assignment: In class we will have a free-writing exercise on one of these texts – have a think about one of them carefully before class.



11. Whiteness and England

Philip Larkin, 'Here,' 'Reference Back' 'Going, Going' 'Like the Train's Beat' (Canvas)

Ingrid Pollard, 'The Cost of the English Landscape' (1989)

Secondary:

*Les Back and Vron Ware, *Out of Whiteness* (2002) (Canvas, excerpts)

Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (Canvas, excerpts) (1987)

*Sivamohan Valluvan and Virinder Kalra, 'Racial nationalisms: Brexit, borders & Little Englander contradictions' (2021) (Canvas)

Assignment: research report two: come in ready to report on some secondary research that you are conducting for your essay, most likely in one or both of two areas a) literary critical arguments b) relevant contextual information. Be ready to explain how your choice of topic, and potential argument, relates to prior scholarship. Does it a) extend it, b) agree with it c) disagree with it? d) revise it? e) talk about something entirely different?

Part Three: Interplay: Whiteness in the Here and Now

12. White Identity Politics

Bret Easton Ellis, *White* (2019) (Canvas, excerpts)

Jordan Peele, *Us* (2019) (film)

Ta-Nehisi Coates, "[The First White President](#)," (2016) *The Atlantic*

Secondary:

*Ashley Jardina, *White Identity Politics*, "The Content and Contours of Whiteness" (Canvas)

George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 'A Pigment of the Imagination' (2019)

Olúfẹ̀mí O. Táíwò, 'Being in the Room Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference' (2021) (Canvas)

Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Stony the Road* (2019) (Canvas, excerpts)

Mini in-class conference: Our penultimate meeting will be a presentation of the whole class's work, with each student preparing a short conference-style presentation of their work and analysis, responding to questions from the instructor and their peers. This work can be doubled up for the program-wide conference.

13. White America

Claudia Rankine, *The White Card: A Play* (2019)

Dana Schutz, 'Open Casket' (2017)

Tony Hoagland, "The Change" (2003)

Secondary:

*Daniel C. Blight, 'How Do White People See?' *Vogue Italia* (2019)

Claudia Rankine, '[Open Letter: A Dialogue on Race and Poetry](#)'

ContraPoints, [America: Still Racist](#), Youtube (2018)

Final Assignment: Due on the final Friday of reading week at 5pm by email or at my office, you will be asked to submit a final paper of 20-25 pages which analyzes the work of 'whiteness' in the domain of culture, with the use of our critical approaches to ground and substantiate this reading, incorporating comments and feedback.

Class Policies

Participation: Participation is an important part of getting the most out of class, and I expect and hope to hear from you during every class, reflecting a commitment to the cohesion and learning of the group, and to completing weekly reading.

Attendance: Please contact me in writing about any foreseeable absences.

Late work: requests for paper extensions will be considered but should be emailed more than a day in advance of the deadline. I ask that you also send whatever work you have completed by that date on the original deadline, reflecting a commitment to get the paper in on time. Late papers without an extension may be subject to a reduction of half a grade point per day. Extensions granted for medical reasons need a doctor's note; please speak to me if any other serious issues arise.

Electronics: please refrain from using laptops, tablets and cellphones in class.

Academic Honesty: Plagiarism is the use of another person's ideas or writing without full attribution. Consequences of plagiarism can range from failure on the paper to dismissal from the course to even more serious actions. You are responsible for familiarizing yourself with Harvard FAS's Honor Code: "Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one's own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs."

Collaboration: You are encouraged to talk with other students about the course and its readings, and to read each others' work. In individual assignments (which may include midterm or term papers, short writing assignments, homework, responses, or take-home exams), collaboration and external sources should be always cited.

Accommodations for students with disabilities: "Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term, (DATE). Failure to do so may result in the Course Head's inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential, although Faculty are invited to contact AEO to discuss appropriate implementation.