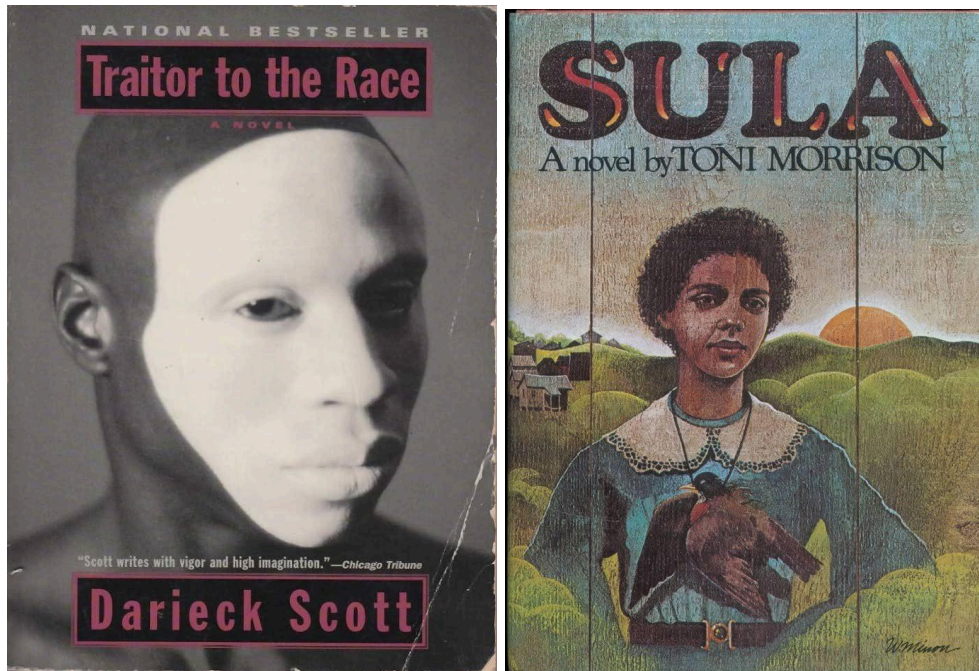


Black Literature and the Ethics of Betrayal
Fall 2024



Cover art for the 1995 first edition of *Traitor to the Race* and the 1973 first edition of *Sula*

Instructor: Jordan Taliha McDonald
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Office Hours: Th 3:30-5:00 pm

Course Description

In the introduction to her 2003 novel *Love*, the critically acclaimed Black American novelist Toni Morrison remarked on the thematics of her literary oeuvre: “People tell me that I am always writing about love. [...] I nod, yes, but it isn’t true—not exactly. In fact, I am always writing about betrayal. Love is the weather. Betrayal is the lightning that cleaves and reveals it.” Reading Black fictions with an eye toward betrayal and what it reveals, this junior tutorial explores this theme within the work of 20th and 21st-century U.S. North American authors like Toni Morrison and Sam Greenlee as well as Caribbean, Latin American, and African authors such as Jamaica Kincaid, Nelson Estupiñán Bass, and Yambo Ouologuem. Through their works, we will consider betrayal in terms of **(1) responses to social, interracial, and diasporic relationships** **(2) accounts of treason, surveillance, and espionage**, and **(3) representations of complicity** during periods of colonialism and slavery. This tutorial will contend with the historical influence of slavery, empire, decolonization, and nationalism as they play out in discourses of betrayal found in contemporary Black diasporic literature. Alongside novels, we will engage with historical sources, short stories, and films as crucial media in which anecdotes and accusations of betrayal are portrayed. Critical essays from writers such as Bénédicte Boisseron, Saidiya Hartman, and Hortense Spillers, will introduce students to the theoretical debates that inform contemporary scholarship in Black literary studies, critical theory, and philosophy. These critical works will also serve as models for the kind of intellectual rigor and academic writing students will be asked to demonstrate in this course for the final research paper.

Course Goals

Over the semester, students will:

- Be introduced to Black diasporic fiction and themes in Black literary scholarship
- Consider the assumptions that inform cultural, political, and philosophical definitions and representations of betrayal
- Evaluate how histories of slavery, colonialism, nationalism, and community formation shape rhetorical and literary depictions of infidelity, treason, counterinsurgency, and other forms of betrayal.
- Gain familiarity with discourses in Black literary criticism and its intersections with critical theory, ethics, and feminist thought
- Develop and sharpen scholarly skills, such as designing a research question, conducting research, compiling a critical bibliography, and writing clear and persuasive prose.

Assignments and Grading

- **Short Essay** (Week 5, 10%): 5-6 page paper, comprising an extended close reading of one of the texts on our syllabus.
- **Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography** (Week 8, 15%): 2-3 page prospectus of the final paper before you begin to work on it. Your annotated bibliography should include 8-10 scholarly sources, and describe, in a few sentences, how each source engages with the thesis of your project.
- **Draft** (Week 11, 15%): A full draft of the final paper will be due in Week 11, and then circulated among classmates the following week in preparation for a final paper workshop during the final tutorial meeting.
- **Final Research Paper** (Reading Period, 40%): 20-25 pages incorporating 8-10 critical sources.
- **Minor Assignments and Participation** (20%):
 - 2 short response papers of 1-2 pages, focusing on a passage from one of our primary texts (sign-ups during the first class)
 - 2 in-class presentations summarizing one of our critical articles (sign-ups during the first class)
 - **Participation and Preparation:** A small seminar thrives when students participate actively and offer thoughtful contributions to class discussion.

Course Texts

Bound to Violence by Yambo Ouologuem

Barracoon by Zora Neale Hurston

The Known World by Edward P. Jones

Imperium in Imperio by Sutton Griggs

Pastrana's Last River by Nelson Estupiñán Bass

The Spook Who Sat By The Door by Sam Greenlee

Sula by Toni Morrison

Annie John by Jamaica Kincaid

Traitor to the Race by Darieck Scott

PDFs will be provided for all short stories on the syllabus.

Course Media

The Spook Who Sat By The Door (1973)

Tongues Untied (1989)

The Woman King (2022)

Optional, recommended additional background reading:

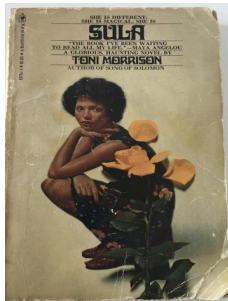
You will find the readings listed below in the weekly folders on Canvas.

Statement on Diversity and Accessibility

Understanding audiences (and the internal diversity of a given audience) will be a recurring theme as we study the different works in the course. Harvard supports its students in all of their neurological and physical diversity and is committed to ensuring equal access to its curricular and co-curricular opportunities for all students. The Office of Disability Services facilitates reasonable accommodations to support our students with disabilities. Contact them at 617.495.1859 or by email at disabilityresources@harvard.edu to learn more about access and possible accommodations. Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning offers a range of academic workshops and individual learning consultations to help support your studies.

Section Theme: Community Pariahs, Immigrant Exiles, and Racial-Sexual Politics

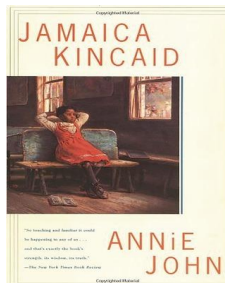
Week 1: Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973), 192 pages



Secondary Reading: “A Hateful Passion, A Lost Love” by Hortense Spillers (31 pages); “Introduction: An Ethics of Betrayal” from *An Ethics of Betrayal* by Crystal Parikh (27 pages)

Optional Reading: “[A Gathering of Aporetic Form](#)” by Rizvana Bradley; “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance” by Darlene Clark Hine (9 pages)

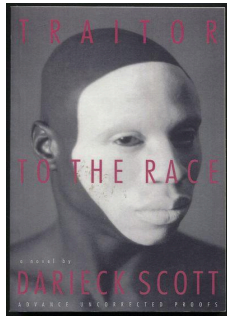
Week 2: Jamaica Kincaid, *Annie John* (1985), 160 pages



Secondary Reading: “Introduction: The Second-Generation Caribbean Diaspora” from *Creole Renegades: Rhetoric of Betrayal and Guilt in the Caribbean Diaspora* by Bénédicte Boisseron (26 pages) “Why Betrayal?” from *On Betrayal* by Avishai Margalit (19 pages)

Optional Reading: “Chapter 4: V. S. Naipaul and Jamaica Kincaid: Rhetoric of National Dis-Allegiance” from *Creole Renegades* by Bénédicte Boisseron; “Introduction” from *The Pleasures of Exile* by George Lamming

Week 3: Darieck Scott, *Traitor to the Race* (1995), 224 pages



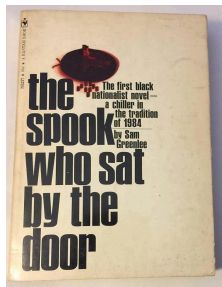
Secondary Reading: “Gay Betrayals” by Leo Bersani (**8 pages**); “Loyalty” by Essex Hemphill (**2 pages**)

Assigned Viewing: *Tongues Untied* (1989)

Optional Reading: “It’s A White Man’s World: Race in the Gaymarketplace of Desire” from *I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch* by Dwight McBride; “Conclusion: Extravagant Abjection” from *Extravagant Abjection* by Darieck Scott

Section Theme: Leadership, Loyalty, and Black Nationalism

Week 4: Sam Greenlee, *The Spook Who Sat By The Door* (1969), 182 pages



***Secondary Reading:** “Notes on Surveillance Studies: Through the Door of No Return” from *Dark Matters: On The Surveillance of Blackness* by Simone Browne (**31 pages**); John Henrik Clarke, “Who Betrayed the African World Revolution?” (**39 pages**)

Assigned Viewing: *The Spook Who Sat At The Door* (1973)

Optional Reading: “Persistently Displaced: Situated Knowledges and Interrelated Histories in *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*” by Samantha N. Sheppard

*This week students will choose one (1) of the secondary readings and must be prepared to speak to the class about their selected reading.

Week 5: Marie Vieux-Chauvet, “Love” from *Love, Anger, Madness* [*Amour, colère et folie*] (1968; transl. 2010), 156 pages



Secondary Reading: “‘Black’ Radicalism in Haiti and the Disorderly Feminine: The Case of Marie Vieux Chauvet” by Kaiama L. Glover (**14 pages**) “Introduction: A Cultural Poetics” from *Horizon, Sea, Sound: Caribbean and African Women’s Cultural Critiques of Nation* by Andrea A. Davis (**30 pages**)

Optional Reading: “Madness and the Mulâtre-Aristocrate: Haiti, Decolonization, and Women in Marie Chauvet’s *Amour*” by Hellen Lee-Keller

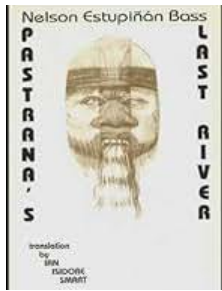
Short Essay Due

Week 6: Nelson Estupiñán Bass, *Pastrana’s Last River* [*El último río*] (1966; transl. 1993), pages 1-200



Secondary Reading: “Narrative Strategies in Nelson Estupiñán Bass’s ‘El último río’” by Henry J. Richards (**6 pages**) “The Authenticity Question” from *Black Literature and Humanism in Latin American* by Richard L. Jackson (**19 pages**)

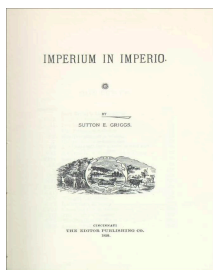
Week 7: Nelson Estupiñán Bass, *Pastranas Last River* [*El último río*] (1966; transl. 1993), pages 201-261



Secondary Reading: “Cimmarrón: The Runaway Slave as Arch-Text” from *Voices Out of Africa in Twentieth-century Spanish Caribbean Literature* by Julia Cuervo Hewitt (**55 pages**); “African American Literature: Central and South America” by Ian Isidore Smart from *Concise Encyclopedia of Latin American Literature* (**3 pages**)

Optional Reading: “[The Question of Ethics in the Semiotics of Brownness](#)” by Ren Ellis Neyra

Week 8: Sutton Griggs, *Imperium in Imperio* (1899), 208 pages

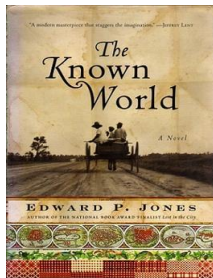


Secondary Reading: “The Problem” from *The Betrayal of the Negro* by Rayford Logan (**8 pages**); “Restaging the Charismatic Scenario: Fictions of African American Leadership” from *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership* by Erica Edwards (**31 pages**)

Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography

Section Theme: Plantation “Traitors,” “African Middlemen,” and Precolonial Impurities

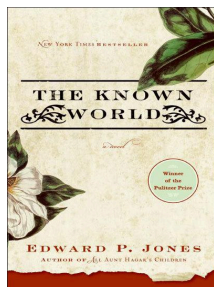
Week 9: Edward P. Jones, *The Known World* (2003), pages 1-200



Secondary Reading: “Epilogue: ‘Black on Black Violence’ in Historical Perspective” from *Slave Against Slave* by Jeff Forret (**12 pages**)

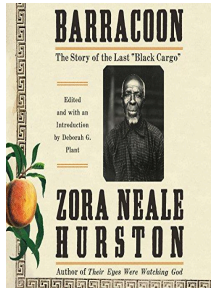
Optional Reading: “Crossroad Blues” from *To Hell and Black: Race and Betrayal in the Southern Novel* by Jeff Abernathy (**17 pages**)

Week 10: Edward P. Jones, *The Known World* (2003), pages 201-400



Secondary Reading: “No More Black Massa” from *Black Slaveowners* by Larry Koger (**16 pages**);

Week 11: Zora Neale Hurston, *Barracoon* (1927*2018), pages 5-95 and “Breeder” from *Breeder and Other Stories* by Eugenia Collier (1994), 67-84



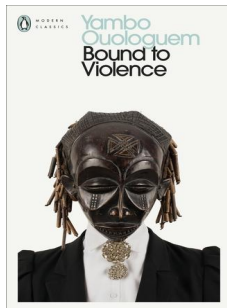
Secondary Reading: “Prologue: The Path of Strangers” from *Lose Your Mother* by Saidiya Hartman (**10 pages**); “Borders and Betrayal in Zora Neale Hurston's *Barracoon*” by Nahum Welang (**17 pages**)

Assigned Viewing: *The Woman King* (2022)

Optional Reading: “[Sisterhood and Slavery in ‘The Woman King’](#)” by Julian Lucas; “[Letters to King Jao of Portugal 1526](#)” by King Affonso I (**2 pages**)

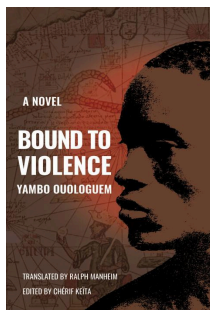
Draft Due

Week 12: Yambo Ouologuem, *Bound to Violence* (1968), pages 1-200



Secondary Reading: Prologue to *African Kings and Black Slaves: Sovereignty and Dispossession in the Early Modern Atlantic* by Herman L. Bennett (**15 pages**)

Week 13: Yambo Ouologuem, *Bound to Violence* (1968), pages 201-272



Secondary Reading: “Africa’s Golden Age Deflated: A Reading Of Yambo Ouologuem’s *Bound To Violence*” by Kwame Ayivor (**25 pages**) Introduction to *Africa Betrayed* by George B. Ayittey (**14 pages**)

Optional Reading: “A World Without Betrayal” from *On Betrayal* by Avishai Margalit

Final Paper Due