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### **Rethinking Blackness**

AFR 372C, AMS 321, E 376M, T&D 357T, WGS 340  
Flags: Cultural Diversity & Writing  
T/TH 11-12:30 CLA 1.104

“To be born Black is an extraordinary gift bestowing access to an unbelievably rich legacy of joy. It’ll lift you to ecstasy and give you pain that can make you stronger than you imagined possible. To experience the full possibilities of Blackness, you must break free of the strictures sometimes placed on Blackness from outside the African-American culture and also from within it. These attempts to conscript the potential complexity of Black humanity often fly in the face of the awesome breadth of Black history.”

Touré, *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness*

### **Course Description**

Cultural critic Wahneema Lubiano argues that “postmodernism offers a site for African American cultural critics and producers to utilize a discursive space that foregrounds the possibility of rethinking history, political positionality in the cultural domain, the relationship between cultural politics and subjectivity, and the politics of narrative aesthetics.” Other scholars such as Cornel West conclude that the black experience in America is fundamentally absurd. Henry Louis Gates Jr. suggests that, “only a black person alienated from black language-use could fail to understand that we have been deconstructing white people’s languages and discourses since that dreadful day in 1619 when we were marched off the boat in Virginia. Derrida did not invent deconstruction, we did!” If postmodernism is characterized by a de-centered human subjectivity then the black condition in the Americas is fundamentally postmodern.

Although many writers render the outsider status of African Americans with somberness this course examines texts that re-imagine black subjectivity beyond traditional narratives of suffering and oppression. The authors that we will read present topics sacred to many African Americans such as the Civil Rights movement, slavery, family and blackness, but do so outside traditional African American literary and cultural paradigms. We will consider how their treatment of such sensitive issues expands notions of black identity and re-writes assumptions about the African American experience. During the term we will explore texts—some non-canonical others more familiar—from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present. Class participants will become acquainted with artists working in a variety of genres such as literary satire, rock musical, autobiography and speculative theatre.

## Books

1. Katori Hall, *The Mountaintop* (2011)
2. Mat Johnson, *Loving Day* (2015)
3. Robert O'Hara, *Insurrection: Holding History* (1999)
4. Issa Rae, *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* (2015)
5. Stew, *Passing Strange* (2008)
6. Touré, *Who's Afraid of Post Blackness?* (2011)
7. Diana Hacker, *A Pocket Style Manual*, 7<sup>th</sup> edition (2011) (suggested)

All books can be purchased at the University CO-OP. Assigned articles designated by an \* can be located on the course's Canvas page.

## Course Requirements & Policies

### Essays

This course carries the Writing Flag. Writing Flag courses are designed to give students experience with writing in an academic discipline. Each student must write two essays during the term. The first essay will be based on a prompt distributed in class. For the final essay you will propose a topic that you will research. The second essay should examine a text not assigned in class (book, photograph, play, film, song, sculpture, performance, painting etc.) that represents blackness reimaged. Each essay should include secondary sources and demonstrate your critical reading, thinking and writing skills. The final essay is meant to showcase your analytical engagement with theories of postmodernist black identity in African American literature, art, film and culture. Please note that written assignments must be turned in by the BEGINNING of class. Late papers will be penalized. It is essential that you carefully proofread your essays for clarity and grammatical errors. All work must be typed in a 12-point academic font, doubled-spaced and have one-inch margins as well as appropriate citations. It is incumbent upon you to keep a personal copy of all work that you submit until final grades are posted.

### Midterm Examination

There will be a take-home exam that covers the major themes, concepts, characters and theories discussed in the course up to the midterm point. The exam will not only test whether you are completing the assigned reading, but also assess your comprehension of the lecture and class discussions. Students are required to select one of three questions and craft a typed, essay-length response. The exam will be graded on the style and quality of argument, relevance of sources and examples, as well as grammar. This is not a group project; students who submit plagiarized or collaborative work will be penalized.

### Group Presentation

Pre-determined groups of 6-7 students will provide author introductions for each new text. Groups are responsible for researching, creating and delivering a presentation on the writer or filmmaker. Groups can focus as broadly or narrowly as they see fit on their subject. In order to disseminate the information groups can provide a handout, use poster boards, shoot a video and/or create a PowerPoint presentation or Prezi. I suggest that you be as creative as possible in order to effectively engage your audience. Groups must work together and insure that the workload is adequately divided among every student.

Groups must submit a typed outline (1-2 pages) on the day of the presentation. Time limit: 5 minutes.

#### Individual Presentation

During the last week of course students will share their final projects. The individual presentation will give you an opportunity to showcase both your creative and intellectual skills. Please note that on the day of your presentation you must submit the typed (2+ page) “script” or outline of your presentation.

Time limit: 3 minutes.

I strongly advise you to consult with me as you develop your individual and group presentations. Make sure that you rehearse every aspect of your presentation because you will be graded on a variety of criteria such as: content, persuasiveness, organization, presentation of evidence, validity of argument, contact with the audience, vocal punctuation and expressiveness, oral language style, appropriate volume and pace of speech, poise, comfort, and eye contact. It is also important that your presentations stay within the time limit so that everyone has an opportunity to participate.

On a final note, the presentations are not just an academic exercise for the presenters. I expect audience members to act as engaged listeners. In fact, your written feedback on each presentation will be incorporated into the grades so your active participation is not just encouraged, but required.

#### Participation

Complete all reading before class and participate fully in class discussions and exercises (presentations, quizzes, performances, group projects and workshops). Many of the texts are quite complicated so I strongly suggest that you take reading notes since our discussions rely on textual observations. Always bring texts to class because I may call upon you to read an excerpt, perform a scene or analyze a passage. Prompt and regular attendance is expected. Tardiness is disrespectful to me and to your classmates. Please be advised that if you miss multiple classes and/or are consistently late your grade will suffer. Note that there are a few extra credit opportunities that allow you to attend a suggested event and submit a typed, 2-page critical review within one week.

Notice: Students with disabilities may request appropriate academic accommodations from the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, Services for Students with Disabilities, 512-471-6259, <http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssd/>

Final grades will be calculated as follows:

Essay 1 (5-7 pages)	20%
Midterm	20%
Group Presentation	10%
Individual Presentation	15%
Essay 2 (7-10 pages)	25%
Participation	10%
Extra credit*	10% (maximum allowed)

## Course Schedule

### Part I.

#### Introduction: Rethinking Blackness in the “Post-Race” Era

Thursday, August 27

Introduction

Tuesday, Sept 1

Trey Ellis, “The New Black Aesthetic.” (1989)\*

Eric Lott, “Response to Trey Ellis’s ‘The New Black Aesthetic.’ ” (1989)\*

Tera Hunter, “ ‘It’s a Man’s World’: Specters of the Old Renewed in Afro-American Culture & Criticism.” (1989)\*

Trey Ellis, “A Response to NBA Critics.” (1989)\*

Thursday, 3

Group Presentation #1: Touré

Touré, *Who’s Afraid of Post Blackness?* (2011)

Tuesday, September 8

Touré, *Who’s Afraid of Post Blackness?* (2011)

Thursday, September 10

Touré, *Who’s Afraid of Post Blackness?* (2011)

### Part II.

#### Rethinking Black History: Revisiting the Past

Tuesday, September 15

Group Presentation #2: Robert O’Hara

Robert O’Hara, *Insurrection: Holding History* (1999)

Thursday, September 17

Robert O’Hara, *Insurrection: Holding History* (1999)

Harry Elam and Douglas Jones, “Introduction: The Methuen Drama Book of Post-black Plays,” (2012)\*

Due: Essay 1

Tuesday, September 22

Robert O’Hara, *Insurrection: Holding History* (1999)

Suzan-Lori Parks, “An Equation for Black People Onstage,” (1995)\*

Suzan-Lori Parks, “New Black Math,” (2005)\*

Thursday, September 24

Group Presentation #3: Mat Johnson

Mat Johnson, *Loving Day* (2015)

Tuesday, September 29  
Mat Johnson, *Loving Day* (2015)

Thursday, October 1  
Mat Johnson, *Loving Day* (2015)

Tuesday, October 6  
Mat Johnson, *Loving Day* (2015)  
Mat Johnson class visit  
Extra credit opportunity: attend Mat Johnson's reading tonight, details TBA  
Midterm distributed

Thursday, October 8  
Midterm

Tuesday, October 13  
Group Presentation #4: Katori Hall  
Katori Hall, *The Mountaintop* (2011)

Thursday, October 15  
Katori Hall, *The Mountaintop* (2011)  
Due: Midterm

### **Part III.**

#### **Real Black: Rethinking the Cultural Politics of Racial Authenticity**

Tuesday, October 20  
Group Presentation #5: Issa Rae  
Issa Rae, *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* (2015)

Thursday, October 22  
Issa Rae, *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* (2015)

Tuesday, October 27  
Group Presentation #6: Dees Rees  
Dir. Dees Rees, *Pariah* (2012)

Thursday, October 29  
Dir. Dees Rees, *Pariah* (2012)  
Due: Essay 2 Proposal and Bibliography

Tuesday, November 3  
Dir. Dees Rees, *Pariah* (2012)

Thursday, November 5  
 Group Presentation #7: Stew  
 Stew, *Passing Strange* (2008)  
 Gayle Wald, “*Passing Strange* and Post-Civil Rights Blackness.”(2010)\*

Monday, November 9  
 Extra credit opportunity:  
 Black Studies Performance Artist Residency Event:  
 Screening of *Passing Strange* with special guest Stew  
 4-6 pm GWB 2.206

Tuesday, November 10  
 Stew, *Passing Strange* (2008)  
 Black Studies Performance Artist Residency Event  
 Location TBD

Thursday, November 12  
 Stew, *Passing Strange* (2008)

Tuesday, November 17  
 Writing & Presentation Workshop  
 Due: Essay 2 draft (bring an additional copy to share with peer editor)

**Part IV.**  
**New Theories and New Renderings of Blackness**

Thursday, November 19  
 Presentations (A-H)

Tuesday, November 24  
 Writing workshop

Thursday, November 26  
 Thanksgiving Holiday!

Tuesday, December 1  
 Presentations (I-Q)  
 Due: Essay 2

Thursday, December 3  
 Presentations (R-Z)  
 Conclusion