

Professor Thompson

AFR 372C (30535)
Rethinking Blackness
Flags: Cultural Diversity

“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 conventional narratives of suffering and oppression. Rethinking Blackness considers how artists present topics sacred to many African Americans such as the Civil Rights movement, slavery, family, and religion, but do so outside traditional African American artistic and cultural paradigms. We will consider how their treatment of such sensitive issues expands notions of black identity and questions assumptions about the African American experience. During the term we will explore a variety of texts and genres from the late 20th century to the present including but not limited to film, literature, autobiography, music, drama, and television.

Required Books

1. Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (1979)
2. Katori Hall, *The Mountaintop* (2011)
3. Mat Johnson, *Incognegro: A Graphic Mystery* (2018)
4. Stew, *Passing Strange* (2008)
5. George Wolfe, *Colored Museum* (1988)

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

Quizzes

You will take five short multiple-choice quizzes throughout the term that allow you to demonstrate your understanding of the major themes, concepts, characters and theories discussed in the course. This is an opportunity to showcase what you've learned from the assigned reading, as well as assess your comprehension of the lecture and class discussions.

Black Art Matters Review

Each student must attend a black artistic performance, art exhibit, film, play or concert and then write a 2-3 page review. The review should summarize or describe the art object or performance, discuss the artist's aims, and provide a sustained analysis of the ways that the piece challenges and/or maintains conventional notions of blackness. Reviews can be submitted online throughout the semester but the final deadline for all reviews is Friday, April 26 at 12 noon.

Group Research Project: Essay

Groups will conduct research and write 7-10 page critical essay on a topic, figure or text that represents blackness reimagined. The subject of the research project must be something that was not covered during the course. The project is meant to showcase your analytical engagement with theories of postmodernist black identity and culture. Each essay should include secondary sources and include proper citations and a properly formatted works cited page. This final project is meant to demonstrate your research, thinking and writing skills. 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 (Times, Times New Roman) doubled-spaced and have one-inch margins as well as appropriate citations. While the essay has multiple contributors, it should read as a unified text. Include each group member's name on the cover page. Additional research project guidelines such as suggested topics, and proposal format will be discussed in class. I strongly advise you to consult with me or the TA in person or via email as you develop your group presentations.

Group Research Project: Presentation

Groups will also deliver a brief (5-7 minutes max) presentation based on their research project. Students are strongly encouraged to use their creativity to present their findings. You can do a video, short skit, website, create a Wikipedia Page, Tumblr, Instagram, PowerPoint or use another presentation tool to share your subject. The point of this exercise is to learn about then teach your classmates about the ways black artists and intellectuals contest prevailing ideas of blackness in the US. Use this as an opportunity to refine your skills. Focus on working collaboratively, writing clearly, and presenting in ways that showcase your creativity, and expertise. 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. Please note that on the day of your presentation you must submit the typed (2+ page) “script,” outline or text of your presentation.

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. It is incumbent upon you each keep a personal copy of all work that you submit until final grades are posted. Late work will be penalized.

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:

Quizzes (5)	25%
Black Art Matters Review	20%

Group Research Project: Essay	25%
Group Research Project: Presentation	20%
Participation	10%

Course Schedule

Part I. Introduction: Rethinking Blackness

Tuesday, January 22

Introduction

Thursday, January 24

Toni Morrison, "Recitatif" (1983)*

Tuesday, January 29

George Wolfe, *The Colored Museum* (1988)

Harry Elam, "Signifying on African-American Theatre: *The Colored Museum* by George Wolfe."*

Thursday, January 31

George Wolfe, *The Colored Museum* (1988)

Tuesday, February 5

Touré, "Chapter One: Forty Million Ways to Be Black." *Who's Afraid of Post Blackness?* (2011), 1-17.*

Trey Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic." (1989)*

Thursday, February 7

Quiz 1

Touré, "Chapter Two: "Keep It Real Is a Prison." *Who's Afraid of Post Blackness?* (2011), 19-56.*

Part II. Rethinking Black History: Revisiting the Past

Tuesday, February 12

Octavia Butler, *Kindred*

Thursday, February 14

Octavia Butler, *Kindred*

Tuesday, February 19

Octavia Butler, *Kindred*

Quiz 2

Thursday, February 21

Mat Johnson, *Incognegro*

Tuesday, February 26

Mat Johnson, *Incognegro*

Thursday, February 28

Katori Hall, *The Mountaintop* (2011)

Suzan-Lori Parks, "An Equation for Black People Onstage," (1995)*

Tuesday, March 5

Katori Hall, *The Mountaintop* (2011)

Research Project Groups assigned

Thursday, March 7

Katori Hall, *The Mountaintop* (2011)

Quiz 3

Tuesday, March 12

Group Research Project Workshop

Thursday, March 14

Group Research Project Workshop

March 18-23

Spring Break

Part III.

Real Black: Rethinking the Cultural Politics of Racial Authenticity

Tuesday, March 26

Blanton Museum Tour

Meet at the front entrance of the Blanton

Thursday, March 28
Stew, *Passing Strange* (2008)

Tuesday, April 2 **Quiz 4**
Stew, *Passing Strange* (2008)
Gayle Wald, "Passing Strange and Post-Civil Rights Blackness."(2010)*

Thursday, April 4
Stew, *Passing Strange* (2008)
Due: Group Research Project Proposal with working bibliography of 5-7 diverse sources

Tuesday, April 9
Dir. Dees Rees, *Pariah* (2012)

Thursday, April 11
Dir. Dees Rees, *Pariah* (2012)

Tuesday, April 16 **Quiz 5**
Dir. Dees Rees, *Pariah* (2012)

Part IV.
New Theories and Renderings of Blackness Explored

Thursday, April 18
Group Research Project Workshop

Tuesday, April 23
Group Research Project Workshop

Thursday, April 25
Presentations (1-3)

Friday, April 26
Due: Black Art Matters Review by 12 noon

Tuesday, April 30
Presentations (4-6)

Thursday, May 2
Presentations (7-9)

Tuesday, May 7
Presentations (10-12)

Thursday, May 9
Conclusion
Due: Final Essay