“No wonder that antiracist work can feel like banging your head against a brick wall.”
Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*

“He stared into his cup, noting that black coffee was not black, but deep brown. Not many things in the world were really black, not even the night, not even the mines. And the light was not white, either, even the palest light held within itself some hint of its origins, in fire.”
James Baldwin, *Another Country*

**Promise and Peril: Race and Multicultural America**
**FALL 2016 / Tuesdays and Thursdays / 11-12:15 / King 127**

**Course Description**
This course investigates the intellectual history of race in American literature and culture. It asks students to consider the stakes in constructing racial difference—that is, the political, ideological, economic, and cultural contexts within which discourses of race circulate. It will look at a variety of textual forms, including short and long fiction, poetry and verse, memoir, natural history, and legal documents. The course requires us to take a long view on race—how its lifespan precedes and exceeds any one of us—a discussion that is crucial, if necessarily indirect, for addressing the issues we face today. The readings do not generate a survey, but instead pursue a genealogy of racial logic—how race functions to manage populations, warping American culture and history in ways that would transform not just the U.S., but also the world.

To reiterate, the point of this course is not to indulge in the messy world of contemporary racial politics, which would only make us repeat some of its fallacies, but to trace certain of its origins; there are ample opportunities for dialogue and action outside of this class and, importantly, off campus. In order for this course to achieve an optimal learning environment, we will need to minimize the present local, letting it marinade, simmer, and stew while understanding it will never serve as our main course here. We will strive instead to obtain a sense of race as a historical object—one that is never stable, but instead shifts according to ever changing political, economic, and cultural contexts (which is intersectionality in its rigorous form).

*Note:* This course should not be confused with my ENGL 267: Ethnic American Literature: Futurism After Retrospect course. Neither should it be confused with Professor Gillian Johns’ ENGL 359: Race-ing Studies in Classic American Fiction. Instead, you may understand this course as informing and complementing both courses as well as many others in the department and college.

This course counts toward English and CAS.
Course Texts

(Notes on the Status of Learning, circa 2016)

A. As an interdisciplinary course, it is important for us to develop diverse and multifaceted critical approaches toward our objects of knowledge. However, aspiring for critical approaches is not easy; learning how to think through, with, and beyond a text is hard stuff, and sometimes quiet pondering is in order. I urge you to interpret lulls in discourse as reflecting the unceasing challenge presented with having to do this kind of tough work, and an invitation to take risks.

B. As a course that will address social, political, and cultural issues, let us recognize that language is not an immediate and transparent expression of our innermost thoughts, feelings, and identities. One of the aims of this course is to ask you to re-examine the “knowledge,” “truth,” and “identity” we often take for granted, to de-naturalize what has been naturalized. To do so, please exercise deliberation with what you express and how you express it, patience with that which is expressed by others, and vigilance with both.

C. Let’s do our best to avoid ad hominem arguments that place the onus of culture and history on an individual, whether a writer, historical figure, or one of us. As we strive to think critically about the intersection between literature, culture, history, and power, in fact we would be reproducing the very dominant systems we may want to challenge if we were we call out an individual rather than to name the contexts within which individuals make claims, decisions, and actions. We learn more and better by thinking about the systems, structures, and conditions that enable individuals to make claims.

D. The literature and ideas we will consider in this course work best—by work best, I mean they enable us to think more critically about the world we live in—when they unsettle us, bringing us out of the comfort of the familiar. Familiar means all of the following: how we expect storytelling and narrative to work; the values we assume structure both “normative” and “radical” positions (aesthetically, culturally, historically, politically); and our authority as “insiders” to a body of knowledge or set of experiences.

The act of unsettling us is meant to make us uncomfortable, without which learning can happen. With this in mind, please be prepared to take on material that may be quite difficult—difficult because it conjures up violent imagery, evokes historical violence, or even engages with personal life. If you need to take a brief moment away from a text, please use that time not only to attend to yourself but also to strive to forge your own critical approach, one that will allow you to think about how this or that image, this or that violence, works in the text—how it advances the narrative, and how it generates critical insights for the course, rather than to indulge in less productive, if convenient, discourse.

Abilities If you have a dis/ability that factors into your performance in the course, you are required to consult me within the first two weeks of the semester with documentation. For more information, please visit the Office of Disability Services, Peters Hall G27-28; (440) 775-5588; http://new.oberlin.edu/office/disability-services/.
Absence  Missing more than one week’s worth of classes will hamper your grade and, worse, thwart your learning. Missing more than two week’s worth of classes for any reason will subject you to failing the class.

Late Work  Work submitted late will be reduced gradually. Abide by due dates strictly. If you request an extension two days (my clock, my call) before an assignment is due, you may qualify for an extension. Work submitted more than two weeks after a due date without prior consultation will not count.

Honor Code  Please include the following statement on all assignments: “I affirm that I have adhered to the Honor Code in this assignment.” If you have any questions, please ask.

Technology  Unless specified otherwise, assignments are to be submitted on Blackboard. Please turn off all devices that will interfere with our learning environment. Also, if you don’t reply to an email I send within two days (my clock, my call), I will assume the right to proceed per my last correspondence.

Assignments

Philosophy, before practice: Insofar as you are accountable for your learning, your work will take the form of curating. Curating has its etymology in caring for; within critical and academic contexts, this translates into caring for your objects of knowledge, organizing them in a manner that can generate theme, argument, and meaning in ways that are meaningful for your interests as they are cultivated in class.

speech

Participation, which is crucial to the success of this course. Please work actively to cultivate an engaging, critical, and respectful culture in class. This means arriving to class having done the reading(s), thought and written about it, and prepared to discuss it with each other.

Presentation, in which a text will be treated with a presentation prepared by a small group of students who will proffer critical interpretation and analysis of the text. These presentations should last approximately twenty minutes and may address the text from different and interdisciplinary frameworks, incorporating historical, political, and cultural contexts as desired and appropriate; they should aim ultimately to provide some working interpretations about the text.

Discussion Lead, where small groups of students will lead discussion for approximately thirty minutes in response to presentations. Each discussion lead will immediately follow each presentation, thus developing strategies to process and respond quickly, although it is also advisable for each group to do some planning beforehand of themes, topics, and questions to incorporate.

writing

3 Reflections, each a 250/300-word narrative articulating your purchase in the class—the particular questions you are interested in exploring: why you are here and what keeps you interested; these papers are meant to guide and develop the queries your bring into the course, from which you will generate your critical momentum and your work.

2 Textual Analyses, 2-page exercises that focus not on what a text means, but how it works, attending to the details, aesthetics, and form of the text. These analyses might consider not just plot and character, but other aspects of form (a tone, metaphor, diction, syntax) and genre (fiction, verse, memoir, nonfiction).
**2 Papers,** each a 5/6-page paper building on and extending the work in your Textual Analyses; if the Textual Analyses ask you to discuss how a text works, think of these papers as addressing why it matters, its significance; given the course topic, the paper ought to address how racial difference operates in a single text; in other words, how is difference narrated and managed in the text? There is no outside research necessary for these assignments, which are intended for you to synthesize your own interpretation and analysis.

**Sourcing,** an annotated bibliography of five sources you identify as pertaining to your interests as articulated in your Reflections.

**Final Essay,** 10-11 pages, a revision and expansion of one of the short essays that should incorporate three critical sources and may, if desired, address a second text from class; this essay is due in lieu of a final exam.

**Schedule**

*Note:* I have provided key questions and topics you’ll want to consider as you read, think, and write on the week’s matter. These texts do a great number of things and will open up myriad insights for you; given our time constraints, we will need to move with a necessary degree of haste, and these questions and topics will provide a certain focus for us.

**Week 1**

8/30: Introductions and Syllabus Overview

What is this course about? What does “race” mean? Based on the syllabus, what are our expectations, and what best practices can we implement to help us meet those expectations?

9/1: Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*  
In Morrison’s representation of early pre-America, how is racial discourse emerging? What is race in Morrison’s novel?

**Week 2**

9/5: First Reflection due @ noon via Blackboard  
What brings you to this course? What questions do you want to pursue?

9/6: Morrison, *A Mercy*  
How does Morrison, writing in our historical moment, represent the origins of racial discourse in America?

What is Morrison suggesting in her essay? In what ways has American literature negotiated race? For Omi and Winant and Fields, how is race structured in American life? What factors do they want us to consider?

**Week 3**

9/13: Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*  
How does race emerge in Equiano? How is that inflected by its autobiographical genre?

For Foucault, focus less on sexuality than on how sexuality—and other discourses, such as race—function within society. How may we think about race as a discourse? Given this, what is Lowe’s
argument about Equiano? What, specifically, is the role of autobiography as a genre in shaping Equiano’s racial discourse?

9/16: First Textual Analysis due @ noon via Blackboard

Week 4

What does it mean to think of race as a historical concept, or a concept with a history? How is race fundamentally connected to class? How do these critics treat the category of race?

9/22: Mary Rowlandson, The Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson; John Smith, The Generall Historie of Virginia by Captain John Smith, the Fourth Booke

How does Rowlandson’s account contribute to an emergent understanding of racial difference? How are indigenous people in early America represented in Rowlandson and Smith?

Week 5
9/27: Thomas Jefferson, draft of Declaration of Independence; The Declaration of Independence; Jefferson, selections from Notes on the State of Virginia

How does form—memoir and, in Jefferson, political treatise and natural history—contribute to racial epistemology? How does racial difference emerge in Jefferson’s work? First Paper Workshop—brainstorming a topic, working toward a thesis, summoning evidence, writing, etc. What topics and questions might be manageable for the first paper? What are the core elements of an effective analytical paper?

9/29: Crevecoeur, Letters III and IX from Letters from an American Farmer; Abraham Lincoln, The Emancipation Proclamation; Frederick Douglass, “The Heroic Slave”

In Crevecoeur, Lincoln, and Douglass, we have three different genres articulating racial difference; how does that happen within the terms of each genre? In other words, how do generic rules determine how race manifests?

9/30: First Paper due @ noon via Blackboard

Week 6

How, along with Douglass’s story, does Twain’s novel help us understand a differently constructed version of racial difference in the mid-19th century? How does the relationship between Jim and Huck, in this farce of adventure and freedom, establish racial critique?

10/4: Mark Twain, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
10/6: Twain, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
10/7: Second Reflection due @ noon via Blackboard

Take your pulse: How has the course attended to some of your initial queries? What new directions has the course taken you?

Week 7

What is the “significance of the frontier” and how does it produce difference? How do Somerville, Kaplan, and Wexler enable us to think about race through questions of gender, sexuality, and empire? How do these political, scientific, and cultural discourses inflect racial knowledge of the period? In what ways is race different in different historical moments?

10/13: Catch-up and midterm reflections
What’s working so far? What isn’t? In what ways has the first part of the course asked us to revise our approaches to thinking about race?

10/14: Sourcing due @ noon via Blackboard

FALL RECESS

Week 8
In what ways does an early narrative of Asian racialization manifest in Eaton’s novel within its historical, cultural, and political contexts?
10/25: Winnifred Eaton, *Me: A Story of Remembrance*
10/27: Eaton, *Me: A Story of Remembrance*

10/28: Third Reflection due @ noon via Blackboard
Take your pulse: What will drive your interest and participation in the second part of the course?

Week 9
What is Mailer’s thesis? How does Moynihan construct racial difference through the narrative of the family? What contexts does Lee provide for the emergence and management of the model minority figure?
What is Baldwin’s argument about racial politics during the era of civil rights? How do the Combahee Collective and Crenshaw revise the approach to thinking critically about race?

11/4: Second Textual Analysis due @ noon via Blackboard

Week 10
What does Thomas’s novel achieve in bridging questions about race and gender in urban life? How do the novel’s aesthetics and voice enable us to see from a particular vantage point and develop a critique?
11/8: Piri Thomas, *Down These Mean Streets*
11/10: Thomas, *Down These Mean Streets*

Week 11
11/15: Selected Poetry
How does poetic form impact the meaning these poems generate? How can we develop reading practices that examine the relationship between form and culture, including race?
11/17: No class meeting
11/18: Second Paper due @ noon via Blackboard
Week 12
In what ways does Erdrich’s novel help us locate indigenous contexts within more contemporary critiques? How does the novel’s form work specifically to frame those contexts and critiques?
11/24: No class meeting

Week 13
   How does the use of language in the novel engage with questions of difference? What is Treuer’s argument about the novel and its managing of difference?
12/1: Chang-rae Lee, *Native Speaker*
   How does the personal story in Lee’s novel intersect with the main plot?

Week 14
What is the relationship between aesthetic form and racial form, between language and culture?
12/6: Lee, *Native Speaker*
12/8: Conclusions

Thursday, Dec 15: FINAL ESSAY due @ 4 pm via Blackboard
My office hours are on Tuesdays, 1-3 pm, or by appointment. My office is Rice Hall 111. Call me Harrod.

PAPER GUIDELINES and RUBRIC

2 Papers, each a 5/6-page paper building on and extending the work in your Textual Analyses; if the Textual Analyses ask you to discuss how a text works, think of these papers as addressing why it matters, its significance; given the course topic, the paper ought to address how racial difference operates in a single text; in other words, how is difference narrated and managed in the text? There is no outside research necessary for these assignments, which are intended for you to synthesize your own interpretation and analysis.

The first essay is due on Friday, September 30 @ noon; the second essay is due on Friday, November 18 @ noon. Both should be submitted via Blackboard.

Specs
• typed, double-spaced
• 1” margins
• Times New Roman 12 pt font or similar
• must include Cover Page

Cover Page (does not count toward page requirements)
• smart, precise title
• abstract of paper: a brief paragraph summarizing the main argument
• identify three keywords or phrases (if your paper were to be found on a database, which terms would someone use to locate them?)
Grading Rubric

A. Introduction  
1. no or poor introduction; too broad (remember, we’re not solving the world here)  
2. some introduction, but not compelling and does not specify major points  
3. introduction grasps reader’s attention (engages the reader) and specifies major points

B. Articulation of thesis (NOTE: Underline your thesis statement.)  
1. no or poor articulation of thesis  
2. some articulation of thesis; too broad or vague  
3. clear articulation of thesis or argument

C. Structure and organization: topic sentences and paragraphs  
1. poor use of topic sentences, which don’t anchor and stabilize each paragraph  
2. topic sentences are present but vague, allowing paragraph to wander  
3. good, focused topic sentences that anchor and stabilize each paragraph

D. Structure and organization: transition sentences and flow  
1. little or no transition between paragraphs; poor flow  
2. some transition or flow between paragraphs; partial structure to argument  
3. strong and/or consistent transition between points in essay; strong flow

E. Use of examples  
1. little or no use of examples to substantiate points  
2. some use of examples or evidence, but inconsistent and/or uncompelling  
3. consistent and compelling use of examples and evidence

F. Conclusion  
1. no or poor conclusion or summary of argument  
2. some summary of points made, but nothing beyond summary; no broad conclusions  
3. a conclusion going beyond summary of what was written in the body of the essay

G. Structural coherence of argument  
1. as a whole, argument lacks coherence; vague, drifting, and/or disconnected  
2. occasional tangents and repetition, but continuous argument is present  
3. every paragraph works to support the thesis; argument makes sense

H. Textual Analysis  
1. little to no analysis of primary texts; too much description rather than analysis  
2. analysis of primary texts reads their content but mostly in broad gestures  
3. analysis of primary texts is sure and deliberate, attending to nuances and details

Final Essay, 10-11 pages, a revision and expansion of one of the short essays that should incorporate three critical sources and may, if desired, address a second text from class; this essay is due in lieu of a final exam. This essay is due in lieu of a final exam on Thursday, December 15 @ 11 am via Blackboard.

Note: All of the preceding specs and grading rubric apply, with the addition of this aspect to the rubric:

I. Sourcing  
1. sources are not useful and/or work against your argument  
2. sources consulted are relevant and add some context for argument  
3. sources consulted are relevant, contemporary, and used to advance argument