ENGLISH 685 (HU)
Harlem in the Jazz Age: Voices and Images of a Revolutionary Decade

Gregory S. Jay, Professor of English

MW 9:30 p.m. – 10:45 p.m.

Reading

Cheryl Wall, The Harlem Renaissance: A Very Short Introduction
Langston Hughes, The Big Sea
Michael D. Harris, Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation
David Levering Lewis, ed., The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader
Angela Davis, Blues Legacies and Black Feminism
Other readings will be added as d2l PDFs
Films/videos: some shown in class, some on reserve at library or online

Course Description

The social construction of “race” comes to us largely through stories, words, pictures, and voices. No one is born perceiving “race”: we learn such perceptions by acquiring a kind of “racial literacy” through our cultural practices, especially modern techniques of representation in photography, film, music and literature. The American “Jazz Age” of the 1920s witnessed the revolution of the “Harlem Renaissance,” during which artists and writers explored and challenged our understandings of “race.” Our interdisciplinary investigation of the era will require close reading of essays, stories, poems, films, paintings, photographs, songs, and novels. Students will identify common strategies of representation among these media and analyze their relationship to significant events in African American history and culture from the 1880s to the 1930s. Writing assignments will aim to enhance students’ analytic skills and visual literacy. Students will gain increased familiarity with how to conduct critical analyses of common tropes, images, types, narrative patterns, and ideological arguments found in various media.

Course Requirements

The class is designed and will be conducted as a seminar. During the course, students will be expected to participate in class discussions based on required readings and viewings. Regular class attendance and class participation will be required of all students.

Writing Assignments:

1. 600-700 word analysis of Langston Hughes’s autobiography The Big Sea (10% of course grade)
2. 600-700 word mini-essay analyzing images of race from the book Colored Pictures (10% of course grade)
3. Eight 250-word discussion postings on d2l (30% of course grade)
4. 1000-1200 word mid-term essay on one or more readings from the Harlem Renaissance (25% of course grade)
5. final exam essay project on music and/or film of the Harlem Renaissance (1500-1700 words) (25%)

(Students will also have the option to revise assignments.)