English 741 Approaches to the Modern II: Black Modernism and Black Modernity

This iteration of English 741 will focus on Black Modernity and Black Modernism. We will be looking at how Black and African American writers, theorists, and artists resisted and countered the hegemonic white European concept of “the Modern.” Frequently this meant restoring Africa and its cultural legacy as a counterpoint and alternative tradition, and/or asserting that the Black experience itself provided fertile ground for a new epistemology and a new aesthetic.

White modernity was implicitly, and often explicitly, built up through a denigrating racializing imagination of “the Other.” Edward Said’s critique of Orientalism provides a model for thinking through how this imperialist and colonialist discourse pictured the Other as irrational, savage, lustful, pagan, and ultimately the site of a “heart of darkness” (in Joseph Conrad’s words). Black Modernism articulated an indigenous tradition flourishing on both sides of what Paul Gilroy called the “Black Atlantic.” Black Modernity names, in relation to this, the conditions of life for Black people under the regimes of imperial, colonial, and capitalist Modernity, and thus becomes the standpoint from which critique can be developed and new arts created. Queer and feminist standpoints and experiences have also been central to Black Modernity and Black Modernism, as we shall recurrently see.

Readings will include work by W. E. B. DuBois, many figures from the Harlem Renaissance, Richard Wright, Paule Marshall, and Toni Morrison. Articles from Critical Race Theory will punctuate our exploration, including work by Franz Fanon, Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, and others. Two films will also be on the syllabus: Within Our Gates (1919), Oscar Micheaux’s pioneering film on racism in America, and Julie Dash’s Daughters of the Dust (1991), set in the turn-of-the-century among the Gullah peoples of South Carolina and depicting their confrontation with white modernity and their effort to hold on to African traditions.

Adjustments to the itinerary may occur along the way, especially if students have suggestions, since the subject is so vast.

The meeting time will be Thursday 4:30-7:10 in Curtin 368.

Tentative Schedule

Readings in Critical Race and Black Studies (assorted PDFs) (week 2)
David Levering Lewis, ed. The Portable Harlem Renaissance (weeks 3, 4, 5, 6)
Oscar Micheaux, dir. Within Our Gates (week 7)
Franz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (week 8)
Richard Wright, Native Son and “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (weeks 9 and 10)
Paule Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow (week 11)
Toni Morrison, Beloved (weeks 12 and 13)
Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (week 14)
Julie Dash, dir. Daughters of the Dust (week 15)