

## The Power of an Illusion: Representing Race in US literature and popular culture

Race, according to most contemporary critical race theorists, is not a biological fact but rather a symbolic category which is constantly constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed via discursive practices. After a preliminary introduction to the current debate on the relation between reality and representation and to the interpretive methodologies employed by Visual Culture Studies, this course will explore the multiple meanings of blackness produced by the history of the Black Diaspora in the Americas. We will examine an array of texts (novels and short stories, films, graphic novels, popular culture), organized so as to illuminate a number of conceptual and thematic knots (gender, racial stereotypes, adoption/subversion of stereotypes, representations of black heroism), as a way to achieve a critical understanding of narrations and counternarrations of black identity.

### Primary texts (listed according to class schedule)

Toni Morrison, "Recitatif" (1983) (pdf; text also available at <http://www.nbu.bg/webs/amb/american/5/morrison/recitatif.htm>)

Melville, Herman, *Benito Cereno* (1856, pdf)

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845; pdf) Also available at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass/douglass.html>

Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861; introduction by Nell Irving Painter, preface by Jacobs, introduction by L. M. Child, and chapters 1-10, 21; pdf)

Zora Neale Hurston, "Drenched in Light" (1924; pdf)

Langston Hughes, "Mother to Son" (1922) <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47559/mother-to-son>

Langston Hughes, "Harlem" (1951) <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46548/harlem>

James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues" (1957; pdf)

Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970)

Alice Walker, "Everyday Use" (1973) (pdf) (only for the 9 credits course)

Paule Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) (only for the 9 credits course)

### Secondary texts

On the African American experience:

-Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror* (pdf of chs 5 and 13)

On representation:

-Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation* (1997) (pdf of ch. 1, “The Work of Representation”)

- Marita Sturken, Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Oxford UP 2009 (pdf of chs 1 & 2)

-Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed., *The Visual Culture Reader* (2002) (pdf of chapter 1, intro to part 4, 25, 26)

-bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (1982) (chapters 1 and 2 pdf)

On Melville's *Benito Cereno*:

- Kristin Moriah, “In the Shadow of the Negro: Minstrelsy, Race and Performance in Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*,” *Peer English* 3 (2008) (pdf)

On the slave narrative, Douglass and Jacobs, and the neo-slave narrative:

-Philip Gould, “The Rise, Development, and Circulation of the Slave Narrative,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*, Cambridge UP, 2007 (pdf)

-John Ernest, “Beyond Douglass and Jacobs,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*, Cambridge UP, 2007 (pdf)

-Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995 (pdf) (only for the 9 credits course)

-Anna Scacchi, “‘If You Go There – You Who Was Never There’: On Contemporary Uses of the Memory of Slavery,” *Iperstoria* 8 (2016) (only for the 9 credits course)

-Valerie Smith, “Neo-slave Narratives,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*, Cambridge UP, 2007 (pdf) (only for the 9 credits course)

On Morrison and *The Bluest Eye*:

-Valerie Smith, *Toni Morrison* (2012) (pdf of intro and part of ch. 1)

- Debra T. Werrlein, “Not so Fast, Dick and Jane: Reimagining Childhood and Nation in the *Bluest Eye*,” *MELUS* 30. 4 (2005)

On Walker's “Everyday Use”:

-Sam Whitsitt, “‘In Spite of It All’: A Reading of Alice Walker's ‘Everyday Use’”, *African American Review* 2000 (pdf) (only for the 9 credits course)

On Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*:

-Carissa Turner Smith, “Women's Spiritual Geographies of the African Diaspora: Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*”, *African American Review* 2008 (pdf) (only for the 9 credits course)

-Anna Scacchi, “Never Too Late to Remember: Cruising the Past in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*.” In *Senior Tourism: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Aging and Traveling*, Transcript Verlag 2017 (only for the 9 credits course)