

Racial Politics in the United States

University of Oregon
Spring 2023

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This class will look at a series of prominent 20th century Black political thinkers writing from within the American context, specifically tracing discussions of structural violence, activism, and the construction of community.

Given the selection of texts, we will focus primarily on Blackness in the United States, although there is necessarily room for other interlocking perspectives. Importantly, this is not a “definitive” account of racial politics in the United States, or Blackness in general. Instead, we will engage with a consistent tradition of Black thinkers writing to and about each other over the century.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

The course grade will consist of a midterm, term paper, and a final. The midterm and final will involve a series of short answer questions which will be posted one week before they are due. The paper will be approximately 8-10 pages.

I encourage participation in class, however given and some people’s natural tendency to not want to talk in large groups, participation will include coming to the instructor’s office hours and email correspondence. Thus, it is really a measure of engagement, rather than how much you talk. There will be no additional assignments, such as quizzes or weekly assignments.

Grade Breakdown: Midterm: 20%
Term Paper: 40%
Final: 20%
Participation: 20%

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS

Historical/Biographical Narratives

Week 1: W.E.B. Du Bois

Monday, April 3: W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, Chapters 1, 2, 4

Wednesday, April 5: W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, Chapters 9, 10

Week 2: James Baldwin

Monday, April 10: James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, up to page 57

Wednesday, April 12: James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, finish.

Week 3: Malcolm X

Monday, April 17: Malcolm X's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Chapters 1, 10, 11, and 12

Wednesday, April 19: Malcolm X's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Chapters 17, 18, and 19

Malcolm X's "The Ballot or the Bullet" from *Malcolm X Speaks*

Week 4: Ta-Nehisi Coates

Monday, April 24: Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*, 1-56

Wednesday, April 26: Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*, 75-108

Black Activism and Structural Critiques

Week 5: Non-Violent Resistance

Monday, May 1: Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Where Do We Go From Here*, Chapters 1 and 2

Wednesday, May 3: Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"
Selected speeches by Cesar Chavez on the Drive

May 5: Midterm due

Week 6: The Black Panther Party

Monday, May 8: Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, pages 33-86, 93-95
The Huey P. Newton Reader, pages 49-66

Wednesday, May 10: Assata Shakur's *Assata, An Autobiography*, pages 173-207, 216-242

Week 7: Angela Davis

Monday, May 15: Angela Davis' *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Chapters 1, 2

Wednesday, May 17: Angela Davis' *Are Prisons Obsolete?* 3, 6

Week 8: Mumia Abu-Jamal

Monday, May 22: Mumia Abu-Jamal's *Writing on the Wall* 106-112, 175-185, 300-312 (pdf pages)

Mumia Abu-Jamal's *Have Black Lives Ever Mattered?*, pages 89-104, 109-131

Race and Gender

Week 9: bell hooks

Wednesday, May 24: bell hooks' *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* 1-33, 84-107, 159-166

May 26: Term paper due

Monday, May 29: No Class

Wednesday, May 31: bell hooks' *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, Chapters 5 and 15

Week 10: Gloria Anzaldúa

Monday, June 5: Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*, Chapters 1-4

Wednesday, June 7: Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*, Chapter 5-7

June 14: Final due

MIDTERM ASSIGNMENT

Please choose one question from each of the following three sections, for a total of three questions. Then, provide approximately a full page response to each. Focus should be paid primarily to a close engagement with the ideas and conceptual precision in your answer. While you are welcome to bring in outside readings, please keep the focus on readings discussed in class. It is open-book/open-note. This will be double-spaced.

A. W. E. B. Du Bois

1. Explain what Du Bois means by "the veil." Compare or contrast this notion with the perspective of either James Baldwin or Ta-Nehisi Coates.
2. What does Du Bois mean when he says the "problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colorline," and how does this impact his diagnosis of the problems facing integration?

B. Ballot or the Bullet?

1. Analyze what the following quote reveals about Malcolm X's attitude towards political violence: "And I see America through the eyes of the victim. I don't see any American dream; I see an American nightmare."

2. In "The Ballot or the Bullet," Malcolm X presents an uneasy attitude towards voting and electoral institutions. How would you describe this attitude? Does he see an opportunity for success at the ballot box?

C. Reflecting on Malcolm X's Legacy

1. What does James Baldwin mean when he says "the only way to defeat Malcolm's point is to concede it and then ask oneself why this is so"?

2. Discuss Ta-Nehisi Coates' attitude towards Malcolm X. What led to him becoming increasingly disillusioned with Malcolm, and how would you describe his attitude by the end of the selection?

TERM PAPER PROMPTS

Select one of the following prompts. You will be graded especially for the clarity and precision of your thesis, as well as your ability to clearly explain the key concepts. The paper will be 7-10 pages, double spaced, with 11/12 font size, and in a legible font. Please include references for anything cited that is not already included in the syllabus. There is no required reference format.

Prompt 1

How do the lessons and discussions surrounding the Civil Rights Movement, including writings by Malcolm X, James Baldwin, Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chavez, or the Black Panthers, continue to apply (or fail to apply) to a contemporary anti-racist struggle of your own choice. Please select two to three thinkers and either present a synthesis or an analysis of how each thinker either does or does not apply to the struggle in question.

Prompt 2

Several of the thinkers we have read have emphasized the need to reconcile racial groups into a broader "American brotherhood." Is this a reasonable goal for anti-racist activism? Select one approach (Du Bois, King, Baldwin), and assess their arguments for either the necessity or desirability of racial reconciliation, then either defend them or critique them using two other thinkers from the course.

Prompt 3

The role of violence in society and activism has been a consistent question through the readings. Do you believe some form of armed activism is justified within the context of racial politics? How does this justification or lack thereof respond to the reality of racist structural violence in the United States?

FINAL ASSIGNMENT

Please choose one question from each of the following three sections, for a total of three questions. Then, provide approximately a full page response to each. Focus should be paid primarily to a close engagement with the ideas and conceptual precision in your answer. While you are welcome to bring in outside readings, please keep the focus on readings discussed in class. It is open-book/open-note. This will be double-spaced.

A. King and the Black Panther Party

1. Martin Luther King Jr. was skeptical of the Black Panther Party's "nihilistic" approach. Is this accusation of "nihilism" fair? How might Huey Newton or Assata Shakur respond?
2. Compare and contrast the way King talks about personal discipline with the emphasis that Assata Shakur puts on "revolutionary lifestyle."

B. Prisons

1. According to Angela Davis, what is the primary ideological function of the American prison system?
2. Please compare and contrast the ways in which Angela Davis and Mumia Abu-Jamal discuss the role of prisons in perpetuating both racial and class domination.

C. Race and Gender

1. Please describe one of bell hooks' critiques of liberal (White) feminism. How does this critique either undermine or bolster one other anti-racist critique we have discussed in class?
2. How does Anzaldúa's account of the border and the cultures it creates either fit with or complicate the idea of anti-Blackness in the U.S., drawing on one other author's understanding of anti-Blackness that we have discussed.