Writing the Nation: James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison
Fall 2019

Instructor: Professor Gabrielle Everett
English 167B: T/F 9:30-1050am
Office Hours: Rabb 143, Tuesdays 11:30-1:30 and by appointment
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Course Description: This course focuses on three twentieth-century African-American novelists—James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Toni Morrison—to explore how US writers construct the nation through writing. Beginning with an analysis of the nation’s founding documents, we will consider the relationship between national belonging, US identity, citizenship, and literature. Over the course of the semester, we will explore the ways African-American writers in particular have imaginatively responded to the social and legal constructions of race, gender, sexuality, class, and ethnic identity within the US. For instance, early African American writers such as David Walker, Maria Stewart, and William Wells Brown adapted the Declaration of Independence to make claims to black freedom. Frederick Douglass and other abolitionists likewise appealed to national sentiments while both critiquing and applauding the Founding Fathers. Following Emancipation, the Civil War, and Radical Reconstruction, African-American and American writers further attempted to revise the nation so that all citizens could belong equally. Yet, as the legalization of Jim Crow segregation into the 1960s demonstrates, most (white) Americans remained attached to fixed notions of race, gender, and nation. The novels of Wright, Baldwin, and Morrison all attest to the nation’s ongoing failure to meet its most celebrated ideals. Through careful readings of novels, short stories, poems, and essays, as well as critical theory and literary criticism, students in this course will develop the skills to think and write critically about the US and its literature.

Learning Objectives:
- To learn the primary form, styles, and political positions of James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Toni Morrison
- To become familiar with key themes, texts, and moments in US writing addressing concepts of the nation, national belonging, and citizenship
- To learn the intellectual, historical, and biographical backgrounds necessary to understanding African-American writing on the US
- To explore the various modes of the novel, as well as genres, forms, and conventions employed by authors attempting to (re)shape the nation
- To become aware of the ways race, class, and gender correlate to national myths, laws, and social and cultural formations
- To practice the skills of critical reading, research, argumentation, close reading, and discussion

Format:
Class meetings will center on discussion and in-class reading activities. Lectures will be brief. Work outside of class will consume approximately 9 hours per week.
**Required Texts:**
James Baldwin, *Go Tell It On The Mountain* (Knopf Doubleday)
Claudia Rankine, *Citizen* (Graywolf)
Richard Wright, *Native Son* (Harper Collins)

*additional required readings on Latte. Please bring printed copies to class meetings.*

**Assignments:** Papers and Blogposts
- Midterm Paper: 5-7 pages
- Final Paper: 8-10 pages
- Rough Draft/Paper Proposal Peer Exchange
- Graduate Students: 25-page seminar paper or two conference length papers (9-10 pages each, with the option to turn the first conference-length paper into a seminar-length project)
- Blogposts: Each student will post three 250-300 word blogposts over the course of the semester. Blogposts are intended as a space to develop working ideas and to raise questions for class discussion. While these are not as formal as papers, they should be written with an analytical scope. For each post, select and type a passage (or passages) from the assigned reading, briefly analyze passage in relation to its thematic and formal elements, and conclude with a discussion question. Each student must also respond to at least six blogposts and read all blogs in preparation for class.

**Grading:**
- Attendance, Participation, Quizzes: 25%
- Blogposts: 15%
- Midterm Essay: 25%
- Final Essay: 35%

**Disabilities:** If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see me immediately.

**Academic Integrity:** You are expected to be honest in all of your academic work. Please consult Brandeis University Rights and Responsibilities for all policies and procedures related to academic integrity. Students may be required to submit work to TurnItIn.com software to verify originality. Allegations of alleged academic dishonesty will be forwarded to the Director of Academic Integrity. Sanctions for academic dishonesty can include failing grades and/or suspension from the university. Citation and research assistance can be found at LTS - Library guides.
Course Schedule:

August 30: Introduction
- The Declaration of Independence

September 3
- David Walker, *David Walker’s Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829), Introduction, Article I, and 84-87
- Maria Stewart, “An Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall, Boston, February 27, 1833”
- Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781; 1787), excerpts from “Laws” and “Manners”

September 6
- Peter Coviello, “Agonizing Affection: Affect and Nation in Early America”
- Recommended Joanna Brooks, “The Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Counterpublic” (2005)

September 10
- Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is July Fourth” (1852), “The Right to Criticize American Institutions” (1847)
- Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience” (1849)

September 13
- Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Politics” (1844) and “American Slavery” (1855)
- Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, “The Slave Auction” (1854)
- George Kateb, “Individual Rights and Democratic Individuality” in *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Cornell, 1992)

September 17
- Claude McKay, “If We Must Die” (1919), “The White House” (1922)

September 20
- Lucas E. Morel, “Ralph Ellison’s American Democratic Individualism” (2015)

September 24
- Richard Wright, *Native Son*, pp. 3-80
September 27
  • Richard Wright, *Native Son*, pp. 81-149

October 1
  *No Class, Rosh Hashanah*

October 4
  • Richard Wright, *Native Son*, pp. 150-220
  • Richard Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937)

October 8
  • Richard Wright, *Native Son*, pp. 221-310

October 11
  **NO CLASS MEETING**
  • Midterm Paper Draft/Proposal Peer Exchange

October 15
  No Class, Brandeis Monday

October 18
  • Richard Wright, *Native Son*, pp. 311-405
  • Recommended

October 22
  • Richard Wright, *Native Son*, pp. 406-430
  • Richard Wright, “How Bigger Was Born” (1940)
  • *Native Son*, Film (2019)

October 25
  • Recommended
    *I Am Not Your Negro* (2017)
  • MIDTERM PAPER DUE

October 29
  • James Baldwin, *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, pp. 3-65

November 1
  • James Baldwin, *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, pp. 66-128

November 5
  • James Baldwin, *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, pp. 128-205
November 8
  • James Baldwin, *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, pp. 205-263

November 12
  • Laurie Balfour, “Find the Words: Baldwin, Race Consciousness, and Democratic Theory” in *James Baldwin Now* (NYU, 1999)
  • Film: *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018)

November 15
  • Toni Morrison, Nobel Lecture (1993)

November 19
  • Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*, pp. 4-78

November 22
  • Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*, pp. 79-158

November 26
  • Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*, pp. 159-196

November 29
  NO CLASS, Thanksgiving Break

December 3
  • Susan Strehle, “‘I Am a Thing Apart’: Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*, and American Exceptionalism”
  • Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Aunt Lute Books 2007, 3rd Ed.)
  • Recommended
    Stephen Best, “On Failing to Make the Past Present”
  • Final Paper Draft/Proposal Peer Exchange

December 6
  • Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), I-V

December 9
  • Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, VI-VII

Final Paper Due: December 15