

The Strange Career of Racial Liberalism

English 80523: Race and Gender in American Literature | Fall 2019

Joseph Darda
j.darda@tcu.edu | Reed 132

Course Overview

In August 2010, before addressing the nation from the Oval Office to declare an end to the Iraq War, President Barack Obama redecorated. His team installed a new oval rug emblazoned with the words of Martin Luther King, himself paraphrasing the abolitionist minister Theodore Parker: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Obama recited the words in speeches throughout his time in office, beginning with his first speech as president-elect in 2008. Since King first used the phrase in 1958, it has stood as a motto of racial liberalism, promising the gradual realization of an antiracist America somewhere in the future. (This departed from King’s original messianic meaning; he didn’t expect to find justice on Earth.) When Donald Trump moved into the Oval Office in 2017, he threw out the rug.

With racial liberalism facing a second, and perhaps terminal, crisis under Trump, this seminar returns to the postwar period to reconsider the culture of Cold War racial liberalism, from World War II to the end of the Vietnam War. This first iteration of reformist antiracism originated from the black press, where soldiers serving in a segregated army campaigned for a “double victory” over fascism abroad and fascism at home, and, in a different vein, from the Carnegie Corporation, which commissioned Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal to write the 1944 tome *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. “What America is constantly reaching for is democracy at home and abroad,” Myrdal declared. “The main trend in its history is the realization of the American Creed.” This fall, we will investigate how writers contributed to and traced the limits of the racial paradigm that delivered some civil rights victories and made others impossible. We will ask what the narrative arc of the postwar “race novel” might reveal about the moral arc of Myrdal’s American creed.

Through the writing of Ralph Ellison, Ann Petry, Lillian Smith, and José Antonio Villarreal, this seminar examines the emergence of the liberal faith in racial progress as well as alternative stories of race in America and alternative horizons for antiracist struggles. We will situate our readings and conversations in relation to the long civil rights era and the Cold War to consider how racial liberalism and race radicalism grew out of and responded to the rise of Soviet communism and the decolonization of Asia and Africa. In 1955, historian C. Vann Woodward published *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, which King hailed as “the historical bible of the civil rights movement.” This seminar turns to the strange career of the racial regime that came next.

Required Texts

Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. 1952. Vintage, 1995.
Petry, Ann. *The Street*. 1946. Mariner, 1998.
Smith, Lillian. *Strange Fruit*. 1944. Harvest, 1992.
Villarreal, José Antonio. *Pocho*. 1959. Anchor, 1989.

Readings on Course Website

- Baldwin, James. "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy." *Esquire*, May 1961, 102–06.
- Bloom, Joshua, and Waldo E. Martin, Jr. "Vanguard of the New Left." *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party*, U of California P, 2012, pp. 288–308.
- Du Bois. Introduction. *An Appeal to the World! A Statement on the Denial of Human Rights to Minorities in the Case of Citizens of Negro Descent in the United States of America and an Appeal to the United Nations for Redress*, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1947, pp. 1–14.
- Feldstein, Ruth. "Race as Un-American: Psychology, Masculinity, and Maternal Failure in the 1940s." *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930–1965*, Cornell UP, 2000, pp. 40–61.
- Ferguson, Roderick A. "The Specter of Woodridge: Canonical Formations and the Anticanonical in *Invisible Man*." *Aberrations in Black: Towards a Queer of Color Critique*, U of Minnesota P, 2004, pp. 54–81.
- Foley, Barbara. "Reading Forward to *Invisible Man*." Introduction. *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man*, Duke UP, 2010, pp. 1–23.
- Garcia, Jay. "Strange Fruit: Lillian Smith and the Making of Whiteness." *Psychology Comes to Harlem: Rethinking the Race Question in Twentieth-Century America*, Johns Hopkins UP, 2012, pp. 102–35.
- Gilman, Nils. "The Collapse of Racial Liberalism." *American Interest*, 2 Mar. 2018, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/03/02/collapse-racial-liberalism/>.
- Himes, Chester. "Now Is the Time! Here Is the Place!" *Opportunity*, Sept. 1942, 271–73, 284.
- Lott, Eric. "Black Mirror: States of Fantasy and Symbolic Surplus Value." *Black Mirror: The Cultural Contradictions of American Racism*, Harvard UP, 2017, pp. 1–32.
- Mailer, Norman. "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster." *Dissent*, Summer 1957, 276–93.
- Maxwell, William J. "Consciousness of FBI Ghostreading Fills a Deep and Characteristic Vein of African American Literature." *F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature*, Princeton UP, 2015, pp. 215–43.
- Melamed, Jodi. "Producing Discourses of Certainty with Official Antiracisms." Introduction. *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*, U of Minnesota P, 2011, pp. 1–50.
- Murakawa, Naomi. "The First Civil Right: Protection from Lawless Racial Violence." *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America*, Oxford UP, 2014, pp. 1–26.
- Myrdal, Gunnar. Introduction. *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, Harper, 1944, pp. xlv–lix.
- Newton, Huey P. "To the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam." *To Die for the People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton*, Vintage, 1972, pp. 178–81.
- Oropeza, Lorena. "'Branches of the Same Tree': Aztlán and Vietnam." *¡Raza Sí! Guerra No! Chicano Protest and Patriotism during the Viet Nam War Era*, U of California P, 2005, pp. 80–112.
- President's Committee on Civil Rights. "The American Heritage: The Promise of Freedom and Equality." *To Secure These Rights: The Report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights*, Simon and Schuster, 1947, pp. 3–10.
- Reddy, Chandan. "Beyond a Freedom with Violence: The Politics of Gay Marriage in the Era of Racial Transformation." *Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the US State*, Duke UP, 2011, pp. 182–218.

Singh, Nikhil Pal. "Internationalizing Freedom." *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy*, Harvard UP, 2004, pp. 101–33.

Zeigler, James. "Un-American Schooling: Anticomunist Discourse and Martin Luther King Jr." *Red Scare Racism and Cold War Black Radicalism*, U of Mississippi, 2014, pp. 18–57.

Assignments, Grading, and Policies

Assignments:

Participation and Preparedness	20%
Discussion Lead	10%
Conference Paper	30%
Article Manuscript	40%

Grading Scale:

A	93–100%	C	73–76%
A-	90–92%	C-	70–72%
B+	87–89%	D+	67–69%
B	83–86%	D	63–66%
B-	80–82%	D-	60–62%
C+	77–79%	F	0–59%

Plagiarism: As defined by the university, plagiarism is “the appropriation, theft, purchase or obtaining by any means another’s work, and the unacknowledged submission or incorporation of that work as one’s own offered for credit. Appropriation includes the quoting or paraphrasing of another’s work without giving credit therefore.” To avoid committing plagiarism, acknowledge and document all of your sources in your written work. If you are ever unsure whether something constitutes plagiarism, please check with me first.

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Reading Schedule and Deadlines

Date	Readings	Deadlines
Week 1	Double V	
Monday, August 26	Syllabus Himes, “Now Is the Time! Here Is the Place!” (website) President’s Committee on Civil Rights,	Discussion lead assigned

	“The American Heritage” (website)	
Week 2		
Monday, September 2	No class (Labor Day)	
Week 3	The American Creed	
Monday, September 9	Melamed, “Producing Discourses of Certainty with Official Antiracisms” (website) Myrdal, Introduction to <i>An American Dilemma</i> (website)	
Week 4		
Monday, September 16	Feldstein, “Racism as Un-American” (website) Petry, <i>The Street</i> (Chapters 1–8)	
Week 5		
Monday, September 23	Murakawa, “The First Civil Right” (website) Petry, <i>The Street</i> (Chapters 9–18)	Conference paper and article manuscript assigned Conference paper abstract due Sunday, September 29 at 5 p.m.
Week 6		
Monday, September 30	Conferences	
Week 7	The <i>Black</i> Black List	
Monday, October 7	Singh, “Internationalizing Freedom” (website) Du Bois, Introduction to <i>An Appeal to the World!</i> (website) Maxwell, “Consciousness of FBI Ghostreading Fills a Deep and Characteristic Vein of African American Literature” (website)	
Week 8		
Monday, October 14	No class (fall break)	Conference paper due Friday, October 18 at 5 p.m.
Week 9		
Monday, October 21	Ferguson, “The Specter of Woodridge” (website) Ellison, <i>Invisible Man</i> (Prologue, Chapters 1–13)	
Week 10		
Monday, October 28	Foley, “Reading Forward to <i>Invisible Man</i> ” (website) Ellison, <i>Invisible Man</i> (Chapters 14–23, Epilogue)	
Week 11	White Liberals	
Monday, November 4	Lott, “Black Mirror” (website) Mailer, “The White Negro” (website) Baldwin, “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy” (website)	

Week 12		
Monday, November 11	Garcia, “Strange Fruit” (website) Smith, <i>Strange Fruit</i> (Chapters 1–11)	
Week 13		
Monday, November 18	Reddy, “Moving beyond a Freedom with Violence” (website) Smith, <i>Strange Fruit</i> (Chapters 12–30)	
Week 14	The Ends of Integration	
Monday, November 25	Zeigler, “Un-American Schooling” (website) Bloom and Martin, “Vanguard of the New Left” (website) Newton, “To the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam” (website)	
Week 15		
Monday, December 2	Oropeza, “Branches of the Same Tree” (website) Villarreal, <i>Pocho</i> (Chapters 1–5)	
Week 16		
Monday, December 9	Villarreal, <i>Pocho</i> (Chapters 6–11) Gilman, “The Collapse of Racial Liberalism” (website) SPOTs (please bring a laptop or tablet to class)	Article manuscript due Sunday, December 15 at 5 p.m.