Crossing the Color Line: Racial Passing in American Literature

Course Overview

Narratives of racial passing having long captivated readers and critics alike for the way in which they provocatively raise questions about the construction, reinforcement, and subversion of racial categories. This course will consider several examples of the "literature of passing" as it has been established as a category within African American literature alongside more ambiguously classified twentieth century narratives of ethnic masquerade and cultural assimilation as a way of exploring how literary and filmic texts invoke, interrogate, and otherwise explore categories of race, gender, class, and sexual identity.

Course Requirements and Policies

This course is a seminar, so attendance and active participation are mandatory. You should come to class having read and marked up the assigned texts carefully and thoroughly, and be prepared to share your thoughts and questions.

Focus Points: Each week, you must post on Moodle one “focus point” or directed question (approximately 60 words) regarding the assigned reading. Focus points are due by Thursday evening at 9 p.m. These focus points should direct our attention to a specific passage, problem, or concern in the reading. Here are two examples:

1. I’m interested in the fact that the first meeting between Clare and Irene in Larsen’s *Passing* takes place on the rooftop of a hotel – what does this tell us about their social position and the way passing relates to it?

2. Irene refers to Clare’s eyes on p. 9, 11, 50, etc. On the one hand, the passages seem to draw our attention to how easy our eyes can be deceived, and thus to the falseness of race as a concept; on the other, they could suggest that there is some racial essence that can be discerned. Which argument does the text seem to be making?

Leading Discussion: You will be required to lead discussion during a portion of one class, in pairs, which means preparing a series of discussion questions pointing us to specific passages in the reading. Sign-up will take place in the second week of class. (Discussion leaders will be excused from submitting a focus point that week.)

Writing Assignments: You will write three papers for this class; one brief 2-3 page paper to give you a sense of what I’m looking for in a paper; one midterm essay of 5-6 pages, and a final essay of 9-10 pages.

All papers should be double-spaced in Times New Roman or comparable font with 1-inch margins all around, and page numbers.

Late papers will downgraded 1/3 of a grade for each day after the deadline. If you foresee a problem meeting a paper deadline, please contact me well in advance about an extension.
Evaluation: Your final grade will be calculated in this way:

- Attendance and Participation: 8%
- Focus Points: 12%
- Leading Discussion: 10%
- Short Paper, 2-3 pages: 10%
- Midterm Essay, 5-6 pages: 25%
- Final Essay, 9-10 pages: 35%

Students with Disabilities: It is the policy of the university to provide reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities. Students, however, are responsible for registering with Disability Services, and for making requests known to me in a timely manner. If you require accommodations in this class, please make an appointment as soon as possible so that appropriate arrangements can be made. The procedures for registering with Disabilities Services can be found at: www.wesleyan.edu/deans/disability-students.html.

Honor Code: Please sign the honor code at the top of the first page of all written assignments: “In accordance with the Honor Code, I affirm that this work is my own and all content taken from other sources has been properly acknowledged.” All work must be done in compliance with the Honor Code, which prohibits the following: the attempt to give or obtain assistance in a formal academic exercise without due acknowledgment; plagiarism; the submission of the same work for academic credit more than once without permission; willful falsification of data, information, or citations in any formal academic exercise; deception concerning adherence to the conditions set by instructor for the formal academic exercise; failure to take constructive action in the event of committing or observing a violation or apparent violation; providing false information and/or deceptive use of documents during an Honor Board hearing. If you need help with proper citations or you have questions on how to avoid plagiarism, let me know or contact the Writing Workshop: www.wesleyan.edu/writing/workshop/

Required Texts (books available at Broad Street Books):
- John Howard Griffin, Black Like Me
- James Weldon Johnson, The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man
- Mat Johnson, Incognegro
- Nella Larsen, Passing (Norton Critical Edition)
- Chang-rae Lee, A Gesture Life
- James McBride, The Color of Water
- Richard Rodriguez, Hunger of Memory
- Philip Roth, The Human Stain
- Douglas Sirk (dir.), Imitation of Life (1959 film and script)

All other readings to be posted on Moodle or distributed in class.

Course Schedule

WEEK ONE
1/27 Introduction: Eddie Murphy, “White Like Me”; Langston Hughes, “Passing,” “Fooling Our White Folks”
   The Tragic Mulatto/a Figure: Georgia Johnson, “The Octoroon”; Countee Cullen, “Near White”; Langston Hughes, “Mulatto”; Claude McKay, “The Mulatto”
WEEK TWO

WEEK THREE

WEEK FOUR
2/24    Nella Larsen, *Passing*


SHORT PAPER DUE

WEEK FIVE
2/24    *Imitation of Life*; selected critical essays

WEEK SIX
3/2     John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me* (including epilogue)

WEEK SEVEN
3/9     Mat Johnson, *Incognegro*

Cheryl Harris, from “Whiteness as Property”

MIDTERM PAPER DUE

3/9-
3/26    Spring Break

WEEK EIGHT
3/30    Richard Rodriguez, from *Hunger of Memory*; Eric Liu, from *The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker*

WEEK NINE

WEEK TEN
4/13    CLASS CANCELLED – MAKE UP CLASS TO BE SCHEDULED


WEEK ELEVEN
4/20    James McBride, *The Color of Water*

WEEK TWELVE
4/27    Philip Roth, *The Human Stain*, p. 1-201 (ch 1-3)
WEEK THIRTEEN

WEEK FOURTEEN
5/16 **FINAL PAPER DUE**