Spring 1-15-2009

ENG 4300-4390-002-098: Whiteness and the American Literary Imagination

Tim Engles
Eastern Illinois University

Follow this and additional works at: http://thekeep.eiu.edu/english_syllabi_spring2009

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
http://thekeep.eiu.edu/english_syllabi_spring2009/128

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the 2009 at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spring 2009 by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.
Senior Seminar:
Whiteness and the American Literary Imagination
Spring, 2009
T/R, 3:30 – 4:45

Instructor: Tim Engles
Phone: 581-6316 (it’s usually easier to reach me by e-mail: tdengles@eiu.edu)
Office Hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 12:45 – 1:45
Course listserv: 4300s09@lists.eiu.edu

Required Texts

Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1992)
David Roediger, Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White (1999)
The Complete Fiction of Nella Larsen
Zora Neale Hurston, Seraph on the Suwanee (1948)
Gloria Naylor, Linden Hills (1985)
Ruth Ozeki, My Year of Meats (1998)
David Henry Hwang, M. Butterfly (1988)
Sherman Alexie, Indian Killer (1996)
Percival Everett, Erasure (2001)
Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece, Incognegro (2008)

Course Description

In her 1992 book, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the American Literary Imagination, Toni Morrison issued a call to arms for literary scholars, encouraging them to shed light on a largely unexamined facet of classic American literature—the influence on white American authors of their membership in the “white race.” Since the publication of Playing in the Dark, dozens of books and hundreds of scholarly articles have responded to Morrison’s call, by examining the influence of “whiteness” on many areas of literary production and reception. These scholars, as well as instructors of literary courses, have also responded to a recent focus on whiteness in a variety of other academic fields, a focus that has coalesced into a broadly interdisciplinary area of study commonly labeled “critical whiteness studies.”

America’s literary canon has expanded to include a number of non-white. Like authors who write from other identifiable or self-proclaimed minority positions, non-white writers tend to be read in search of insight into their own supposed group experience. Thus, it may surprise you to learn that a great deal of non-white intellectual energy has been devoted to understanding the complexities of white experience, and of white power. In part because those Americans who have been labeled “black” “or “Chinese” or other
non-white terms have had much to fear from those who have been labeled “white,” many significant non-white writers have provided penetrating insight into the thoughts, values, and behavior of America’s racial majority, insights from which even white Americans themselves can learn. As we will see, such stories, essays, and novels can also help us understand the broader significance for all Americans of centuries of white hegemony.

Our course will be conducted as an inquiring conversation on these matters, with your active participation central to our work. Because the success of our conversations will depend so heavily on everyone’s participation, it is crucial that you keep up with the reading, and that you do so with careful attention. In fact, we will begin many of our sessions with a reading quiz, primarily intended to insure that you do maintain attentive reading habits. Also, the rule regarding attendance is: be here. If you have more than two absences this semester, your course grade will drop a full letter grade for each absence beyond two.

Course Requirements

Written response and oral presentation: Each student will choose one day on the syllabus. For this class session, you will write a one-page, single-spaced response/review of a related secondary source (usually chosen by the instructor). You will duplicate and hand out this written response to the rest of us on the day of your presentation, and it will function as your guidelines for summarizing the secondary source’s main or most useful points, for providing your thoughtful reaction to it, and for leading class discussion for part of the session. Be succinct and focused—don’t plan to speak for more than fifteen minutes or so. Possibilities: focus our attention on a problem or set of problems, and the apparent solution(s) offered in the secondary source; make connections, within the text, and/or with others; zero in on a significant or surprising aspect of the secondary source and/or the novel that we’re reading at the time. Other approaches are of course possible. The written response should end with at least two questions whose answers could provide, as you see it, keys to understanding the primary text under discussion. Don’t plan on talking by yourself for long—your main goal is to stimulate discussion. After the discussion of the text, you will then revise your response (into something no more than two pages, single spaced) on the basis of your reaction to how class discussion changed (or verified) your response to the secondary source, and describing also how well you think your presentation and the class discussion went. This revision will be due one week after the in-class presentation. (15%)

5-7 page critical essay: This paper will focus on any one of our syllabus readings from the first half or so of the semester (in the case of Morrison’s Playing in the Dark, you could focus on it alone, or use it to help interpret another work on the syllabus). Focus your close interpretation of the work in any way you choose, taking your reader beyond what most are likely to realize when first reading the text. You are welcome to incorporate points and insights raised during class discussion, but if you do so, do your best to add further insight. Like the longer essay, this one will follow traditional conventions for academic essays (e.g., unity, coherence, proper formatting and MLA-
style documentation, and so on). You are welcome to use any secondary sources, but they are not required for this paper. (20%)

**10-12 page research essay:** This paper will focus on one of the other literary texts on our syllabus (in other words, you may not write about the same text in both essays), and another work not on our syllabus. The topic is racial whiteness, however you choose to approach it. A 250-400 word proposal will be required beforehand. The essay must reflect your close attention to and understanding of insights and interpretive concepts that will have arisen throughout the semester, and of course, it must be an entirely new essay (not something you wrote for a previous course). (25%)

A bit more about essays: All writing assignments are due at the beginning of the class period on the day they are due, whether the student is in class or not. **Late-paper penalty:** fifteen points each day late.

**Final exam** (take home—details will be provided later in the semester) (25%)

**Active, thoughtful class participation and good reading-quiz grades:** I will not deliver lectures in this class; therefore, because we are a relatively small group, we must all contribute to a positive, challenging, interesting learning environment. Doing so will call for your careful attention before class on each assigned reading, and your willingness to share your thoughts, questions, and feelings with others about what you read and hear.

Again, because your careful preparation for class is so crucial, I will begin some sessions with a reading quiz. I know that because you are advanced students I can trust most of you to keep up with our heavy reading load, but past experience has demonstrated that reading quizzes are the best way to ensure that everyone is prepared to participate in class discussion. Questions on the quiz can also function at times as a good lead-in to class discussion. Because the answers to unannounced quizzes tend to arise during class, and because one purpose of the quizzes is to encourage punctual class attendance, these quizzes cannot be made up (even if you come to class late). These quizzes also function as a reward for those who attend class regularly and on time. On the other hand, I recognize that students must miss class at times and therefore might miss a quiz through no fault of their own, so at the end of the semester I will drop your lowest quiz grade before calculating the average. Be aware that most of these novels are intense, concentrated, demanding readings, and schedule your study time accordingly. (15%)

**Other Matters**

**E-mail:** Enrollment in this class requires an e-mail account—me aware that Yahoo, Hotmail, and other free accounts are sometimes too limited and/or unreliable for professional purposes. E-mail is the quickest, easiest way to reach me if I am not in my office. I welcome any and all questions and comments.

You also have an email assignment: By Friday (1/16) at 5 p.m., send an e-mail message to Dr. Engles (tdengles@eiu.edu), who will use your e-dress to subscribe you to the class
listserv. In your message, (1) identify which course you’re in (English 4300); (2) describe yourself in whatever way you choose, including your career aspirations; (3) write a statement to the effect that you have carefully read and agree with the above course policies and requirements (or perhaps that you disagree with some of them—which is okay, if you explain why), and (4) put your name at the end of it, as you always should in professional exchanges.

**Academic honesty:** I expect you to act honestly and do your own work in this class, and so does Eastern Illinois University. It is your responsibility (once again) to familiarize yourself with the English Department’s policy on plagiarism: “Any teacher who discovers an act of plagiarism—‘The appropriation or imitation of the language, ideas, and/or thoughts of another author, and representation of them as one’s original work’ (Random House Dictionary of the English Language)—has the right and the responsibility to impose upon the guilty student an appropriate penalty, up to and including immediate assignment of a grade of F for the course, and to report the incident to the Judicial Affairs Office.”

[Daily Schedule coming soon . . . ]