

SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES  
AMERICAN STUDIES PROGRAMME

# Writing the Colour Line: American Literature from *Plessy* to Ferguson



Jacob Lawrence, "Bar and Grill," 1941

Module Handbook 2017-8

# Writing the Colour Line: American Literature from *Plessy* to *Fergusson*

**Module Convenor:** Dr Gavan Lennon

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**Office Hours:**

Thursdays 2pm-3pm in Fys03 or by appointment.

## Module Aims

The Supreme Court's 1896 decision in the case of *Plessy V. Ferguson* asserted that racial segregation was legal under the United States' Constitution. Since the legal demise of segregation, extra-legal strategies for separating the races and for policing the behaviour of African Americans have continued to thrive. Alongside this racial suppression, writers and activists from the Harlem Renaissance, through the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, to the developing Black Lives Matter movement of the present day have used every means available to challenge and dismantle racism.

This module investigates the literary strategies that black and white authors deployed to challenge the status quo and to instigate racial change over the course of more than a century. As such, it aims to provide students with an understanding of the relationship between art and activism and a sense of African American and US Southern literary histories. Students will be encouraged to sharpen and develop their critical skills, their ability to craft a compelling argument, and their capacity to think laterally about a range of complex and challenging intellectual issues.

## Learning Outcomes

By the end of the module students should be able to:

1. demonstrate extensive knowledge and understanding of how literary traditions of the United States developed in response to legislative and extra-legal programs that divided the nation racially;
2. identify and evaluate the artistic and political strategies that authors employ to critique and explore racism and racial division;
3. exhibit advanced knowledge and understanding of matters of historical and social importance relevant to the literature studied and an ability to apply and to synthesise widely differing critical perspectives;
4. execute advanced skills in planning and composing essays, including independent research, critical engagement with secondary sources, analysis and close reading of primary texts, scholarly referencing, and good writing and presentation.

5. demonstrate graduate skills such as reflective learning, working independently and showing confidence in class discussions and/or presentations to peer groups.

## Module Organisation

The module will consist of **weekly 3-hour workshops** on Thursdays from 15.00-18.00, all of which are outlined in the week-by-week timetable at the end of this document. All sessions will be supplemented by handouts, readings supplied on Blackboard, and will include group discussion.

This document contains an outline programme and general themes to be covered in each session. Materials to be discussed in class will be posted on the module Blackboard page. It is therefore important that you are registered on the Blackboard site and check the page regularly.

Please check your Individual Student Timetable regularly for room details, and speak to Gavan if you have any trouble. Unfortunately, room changes are inevitable and out of our control, so it is imperative that you regularly check your Individual Student Timetable before classes so you know where to go.

## Reading

You are expected you to attend every session of class having not only read the assigned text but also having read around the topic. The module Blackboard site will list required and recommended reading for each session.

**The key texts for this course are listed in the weekly schedule overleaf and on Blackboard. These include several books for purchase:**

Mark Twain, *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894)

William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses* (1942)

Percival Everett, *Erasure* (2001)

Other course material, including excerpts from novels, poetry, and short stories will be provided in handouts or on Blackboard. When dealing with books, I don't mind which edition of these books you work with, including Kindle, as long as you are in possession of the full, unabridged text.

## **Assessment**

All assignments must be submitted on Turnitin by 2pm on the deadline day. No hard copies are required. Please consult Turnitin for further details on assignments, e-submission policies, essay penalties, and information on extenuating circumstances requests.

### **Assignment 1: Close Reading, 1,600 words (40% of total mark)**

W.E.B Du Bois writes: “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour-line.” How is this problem dramatized in **ONE TEXT** covered in class so far?

You should focus on a brief passage from either Twain **or** Faulkner **or** one poem or song written during the Harlem Renaissance. You may not write on a text that you intend to work on in the second assignment. You may use as many secondary sources as you see fit and I recommend that you draw on at least 1 essay discussed so far in class, but **Primary Evidence** should be most prominent in this assignment.

**SUBMISSION DUE: October 27, 2017 at 2pm**

Return Date: November 21, 2017

### **Assignment 2: Comparative Research Essay, 2,400 words (60% of total mark)**

For this final assignment you are expected to critically engage with **two texts** that have been covered in the module to answer one of the following questions:

- If the colour line was the problem of the 20th century, what will be the problem of the 21<sup>st</sup>?
- The story of race in the long 20<sup>th</sup> century is a tragedy. Prove this statement.
- The story of race in the long 20<sup>th</sup> century is a comedy. Prove this statement.
- The idea of the “Negro Problem” is misguided: if there is a problem, it is with whiteness. Discuss this statement based on the representation of whiteness in work by African American and/or white authors
- How can literature do the work of activism?

- Is the South the nation's most racist region? Discuss with reference to works set in the North and/or the South by authors from the North and/or the South.
- Comment on the role of leadership in the black freedom struggle. How are leaders portrayed, represented, and mourned in the literature of race?
- How does popular music reflect or resist the moment in which it is written?
- The novelist Ralph Ellison once refused to "Jim Crow [his] imagination." To what degree is American literary history segregated?
- How do two writers on this course write against racial segregation?
- A question of your own creation. You must discuss the question with me beforehand.

Whichever question you choose, you must include **AT LEAST 5** secondary sources. You **MAY NOT** answer on any text on which you have written for the earlier assignment.

**SUBMISSION DUE: December 15, 2017 at 2pm**

Return Date: January 12, 2018

## Weekly Schedule and Reading List

	Topic	Required Reading
<b>Workshop 1</b> <b>28 September 2017</b>	Introduction	Handouts – from W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, and Toni Morrison – will be provided in class
<b>Workshop 2</b> <b>5 October 2017</b>	Inventing Segregation: Mark Twain	Mark Twain, <i>The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson</i> (1894) [ <b>for purchase</b> ]
<b>Workshop 3</b> <b>12 October 2017</b>	The Harlem Renaissance and the Blues	Selection of poetry and music on <b>Blackboard</b> .
<b>Workshop 4</b> <b>19 October 2015</b>	The Story of the South: William Faulkner	William Faulkner, "The Bear" in <i>Go Down, Moses</i> (1942) [ <b>for purchase</b> ]
<b>Academic Development Week – NO CLASS</b>		
<b>Workshop 5</b> <b>2 November 2017</b>	The Seeds of Change: Lorraine Hansberry	Lorraine Hansberry, <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> (1959) [ <b>on Blackboard</b> ]
<b>Workshop 6</b> <b>9 November 2017</b>	The Civil Rights Short Story	Henry Dumas, "The Marchers" (1961); Eudora Welty, "Where is the Voice Coming From?" (1963); Charles Johnson, "Dr. King's Refrigerator" (2005) [ <b>all on Blackboard</b> ]
<b>Workshop 7</b> <b>23 November 2017</b>	Radical Poetry of the 1960s	Selection of poetry on <b>Blackboard</b>
<b>Workshop 8</b> <b>30 November 2017</b>	Satire in the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century: Percival Everett 1	Percival Everett, <i>Erasure</i> (2001) [ <b>for purchase</b> ]. Read to page 150, the end of "My Pafology."
<b>Workshop 9</b> <b>30 November 2017</b>	The Problem with Reading for Race: Percival Everett 2.	Percival Everett, <i>Erasure</i> (2001) [ <b>for purchase</b> ]. Finish reading the novel.
<b>Workshop 10</b> <b>7 December 2017</b>	Black Lives Matter Verse	Selection of poetry and music on <b>Blackboard</b> .