

**AFR 374f, AMS 370, Fall 2018**

**The Literature of Black Politics: Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison**

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**GWB 2.116c**

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**Office Hours W 1:30-4:30**

Within the African American intellectual and political tradition, artists have produced many of the most penetrating insights about American culture and politics. Beginning in the latter half of the twentieth century however, literary artists have vied with Black musicians for pride of place. Among this group of literary artists and intellectuals, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison are among the most important. The corpus of each contains first-rate literary works, provocative and erudite literary and cultural criticism, and insightful theoretical analysis of the perils and possibilities of black life under conditions of American political modernity. In this course, we will examine the novels and critical essays of these writers as works of cultural criticism, political theorizing, and political engagement. We shall ask, how do each of these writers conceive the legacies of slavery, mastery, segregation, and racial terror, and how do each conceive the relationship between these legacies and contemporary black life? How does each writer conceive the lessons of this legacy(s) for contemporary political life? What aesthetic forms are most adequate to wrestling with these legacies? What is the vocation of the artist in Black America and America as a whole? And are these conceptions of the intellectual's vocation politically relevant for us today?

The aim of this course will be to facilitate, among students, a substantive intellectual engagement with these authors' novels and critical works, and to wrestle with the some of the central intellectual problems within Black political thought and Cultural criticism.

**Required Texts:**

Invisible Man; Ralph Ellison (Vintage International)

Go Tell it On the Mountain; James Baldwin (Vintage International)

James Baldwin: Collected Nonfiction (Library of America)

Beloved; Toni Morrison (Vintage)

All books available from amazon.com. Additional readings, indicated by \* will be posted to Canvas.

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

3 2 page response papers @ 5% (15%); due October 1, October 29, and November 26.

5-7 page Final Paper (45%); due December 17

Seminar Participation (40%)

This course is designed to be a seminar. Students are expected to have completed the readings prior to class and to actively participate in class discussion. The quality of discussion depends on the extent of your preparation and participation. Attendance is required, as is completion of all assignments.

The University of Texas at Austin provides, upon request, appropriate accommodations for qualified students with disabilities. To determine if you qualify, please contact the Dean of Students at 471-6259 or 471-4641 TTY. If the office certifies your needs, I will work with you to make appropriate arrangements.

A student who misses an examination, work assignment, or other project due to the observance of a religious holy day will be given an opportunity to complete the work missed within a reasonable time after the absence, provided that he or she has properly notified the instructor. It is the policy of the University of Texas at Austin that the student must notify the instructor at least 14 days prior to the classes scheduled on dates he or she will be absent to observe a religious holy day. For religious holy days that fall within the first two weeks of the semester, the notice should be given on the first day of the semester. The student will not be penalized for these excused absences, but the instructor may appropriately respond if the student fails to complete satisfactorily the missed assignment or examination within a reasonable time after the excused absence.

### **Course Schedule and Reading Assignments**

#### **Week 1: Black Critique and the Political Theology of America**

Wednesday, August 29: Introduction

#### **Section 1**

#### **Ralph Ellison: Blackness and the Promise of American Democracy**

#### **Weeks 2: Harlem, the Blues Sensibility, and the Spirit of Black Politics**

Monday, September 3: Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues"\*, & "Harlem is Nowhere"\*.

Wednesday, September 5: Ralph Ellison, "The Perspective of Literature"\*.

#### **Weeks 3-6: The Politics of Invisibility**

Monday, September 10: Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, Prologue, Epilogue, and chapter 1 & 2.

Wednesday, September 12: Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, chapter 3-chapter 6.

Monday, September 17: Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, chapter 7-chapter 11.

Wednesday, September 19: Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, chapter 12-chapter 16.

Monday, September 24: Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, chapter 17-chapter 21.

Wednesday, September 26: Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, chapter 22 –chapter 25.

Monday, October 1: ***First Response Paper Due***

Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, *Epilogue*, “The Novel as a Function of American Democracy”\*, & “What Would America be Like Without Blacks”\*.

## **Section 2**

### **James Baldwin: Re-dis- covering America**

#### **Harlem, Whiteness, and the Racial State of Exception**

Wednesday, October 3: James Baldwin, “The Harlem Ghetto”, & “Many Thousands Gone”

#### **Week 7: Blackness and the Night-side of American Exceptionalism**

Monday, October 8: James Baldwin, Go Tell it on the Mountain, part I

Wednesday, October 10: James Baldwin, Go Tell it on the Mountain, part II

#### **Weeks 8:**

Monday, October 15: James Baldwin, Go Tell it on the Mountain, part III

Wednesday, October 17: James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village,” & “The Creative Process” \*.

#### **Week 9: “Achieving our Country”**

Monday, October 22: James Baldwin, “The Fire Next Time,” p. 333- 352.

Wednesday, October 24: James Baldwin, “The Fire Next Time,” p. 352- 379.

#### **Week 10: Mourning America**

Monday, October 29: ***Second Response Paper Due***

James Baldwin, “No Name in The Street,” p. 449- 475.

Wednesday, October 31: James Baldwin, “No Name in The Street,” p. 475- 519.

#### **Week 11:**

Monday, November 5: James Baldwin, “No Name in The Street”\*, p. 519- 552.

Wednesday, November 7: Toni Morrison, “James Baldwin Remembered”\*.

### Section 3

#### **Toni Morrison: Memory and Self-Making in the Midst and Aftermath of Catastrophe**

##### **Week 12: Making and Unmaking Whiteness**

Monday, November 12: Toni Morrison: Playing in the Dark, preface & chapter 1\*.

Wednesday, November 14: Toni Morrison: “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation”\*.

##### **Week 13: The Interiority of Slavery**

Monday, November 19: Toni Morrison, Beloved, p. 3- 63.

Wednesday, November 21: **No Class (Thanksgiving)**

##### **Week 14: Re-memory and the Afterlife of American Mastery**

Monday, November 26: *Third Response Paper Due*

Toni Morrison, Beloved, p. 64 -117.

Wednesday, November 28: Toni Morrison, Beloved, p. 118- 165.

##### **Week 15: The Political Virtues of Black Women**

Monday, December 3: Toni Morrison, Beloved, p. 169-235.

Wednesday, December 5: Toni Morrison, Toni Morrison, Beloved, p. 239- 275.

Week 16:

Monday, December 10: Toni Morrison, “Rediscovering Black History” \*, “What the Black Woman Thinks of Women’s Lib” \*, “On The Back of Blacks” \*, “The Dead of September 11” \*.

***Final paper Due December 17.***