

Bates College
First-Year Seminar 242
Blackness (& Whiteness) in the Social Imagination
Fall 2008

Instructor: Professor Charles V. Carnegie
157 Pettengill Hall. Phone 6079, e-mail, ccarnegi
Office Hours: M 1:30 - 3:00
 F 9:45 – 11:45
Writing Assistant: Julia Caffrey, email, jcaffrey

We live in a society where the differences in physical appearance we call “race” figure prominently, whether we realize it or not, in how we think about ourselves and others and in almost every other aspect of everyday life. Yet, paradoxically, “race” is as unreal in a biological sense as it is real in historical and social terms. One aim of this seminar is to understand this paradox: How did it come about that biologically inconsequential differences came to take on such a large social significance? How is it that the fiction of “race” continues to sustain the injustices of racism?

Instead of asking: ‘What *is* “race?”—a question that still makes it seem as if “race” is an unchanging, objective part of the natural world—we shift the focus in this seminar by asking: How did racial categories come about historically, how are they produced, and how do they work? What is their social significance: what, and how, do they mean? The seminar aims, then, to challenge our commonsense ideas about so-called racial differences and at the same time give us the tools with which to better understand their nefarious uses.

Because we’ve grown up with the racialized categories we inhabit—“blackness,” “whiteness,” etc—we sometimes think we know and understand them better than we really do. Another set of objectives for the seminar, then, involve coming to recognize and consider some of the subtle, unseen, yet ever-present ways in which “race” structures our lives; to see how racial meanings shift over time as they respond to and influence changes in other aspects of society. In the final analysis, I would like you not simply to be learning about “race” in this seminar but to use the knowledge and insights you develop here to become agents of meaningful social change against racism.

The seminar puts special emphasis on writing. You will have frequent writing assignments—mostly of short and medium length, in and out of class—to help you to work on your writing with the aim of becoming more self-aware, cogent, confident writers. To assist in this process, you will have opportunities to meet with me, with the writing assistant for the course, Julia Caffrey, and or with a staff member at the Writing Workshop throughout the semester. Writing—along with lively, respectful class discussions, research projects, and in-class presentations—serves as the means through which we develop greater insight into the vexed subject matter of the course.

Final grades will depend on my overall assessment of the quality of your class participation and the thoughtfulness, care and originality of your written papers. I will provide written comments on, but will not assign grades to, your individual papers. Instead, I ask that you keep all drafts of each of your papers (with comments) in a dossier which you will hand in at the end of the semester for grading.

Books & Readings

Dalton Conley, Honky

Randall Kennedy, Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word

Dwight McBride, Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch

Paula Rothenberg, ed. White Privilege

Roger Sanjek, The Future of Us All: Race and Neighborhood Politics in New York City

Diana Hacker, A Writer's Reference

Other readings and relevant materials for the seminar may be posted from time to time on the College's on-line platform, Lyceum

Class Meetings

(Note that reading and other assignments are due on the dates listed)

Sept 2 - Introductions and goals of the seminar
Handout & discussion of first writing assignment

Make an appointment to meet with Julia to discuss the assignment sometime before Friday

Sept 3 - To help us think about our responsibility to the group and develop a set of principles to guide our class discussions about the emotionally charged subject matter of this seminar, I'd like you to read Carol Trosset, "Obstacles to Open Discussion and Critical Thinking" Change 30(5), Sept-Oct 1998.

Read also the following three essays from Paula Rothenberg, White Privilege, (pp 9-23):
Richard Dyer, "The Matter of Whiteness"
Harlon Dalton, "Failing to See"
bell hooks, "'Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination"

To help you focus on some of the key issues in the essays, take note of the questions on p. 25 before you begin reading. The questions will also serve to guide our discussion in class.

Sept 5 - View in class and discuss the video *Shaped By Writing*
Be sure to start reading Honky over the weekend. We will begin to discuss the book on Monday.

Writing assignment # 1 due Saturday at 4:00 p.m.

Sept 8 - Dalton Conley, Honky Prologue & chapters 1 – 6 pp xiii-xiv & 3 - 63

The book is a personal memoir by a professional sociologist. We will use it to introduce several concepts and ideas such as "dominance," "privilege," "marked" vs. "unmarked"

categories, “normativity,” “racial geography,” “cultural capital,” and others that can help us better to understand Conley’s experience and our own.

Here are a few questions to help focus your reading of the text: What are the comparisons and contrasts Conley is making (sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly)? How are contrast and comparison central to the story he is telling? What does the author mean when he says (p 37) that “Learning race is like learning a language”? How does he help us to see relationships between race and class as they operate to structure the lives of the individuals and families he writes about? Does Honky help to stimulate you to think more pointedly about your own experience of raced belonging that you began to write about in your first essay? In what ways does it do so?

Meet with Julia before Friday to discuss your ideas for the second paper on the racialized self

Sept 10 - Conley, Honky Chapters 6 – 17 & Authors Note pp 65 - 207

Sept 12 - An introduction to the Writing Workshop

We will also finish up our discussion of Conley’s Honky

Sept 15 - View before class the PBS documentary, “The Difference Between Us,” Part 1 of the PBS series, *Race—The Power of an Illusion* (on reserve in Ladd Library)

The companion website www.pbs.org/race has useful resources to accompany the film that I encourage you to explore. We will be drawing on some of them for class discussion and assignments.

First draft of paper to be handed in to Julia

Sept 17 - “The Difference Between Us,” PBS video part 1 (continued)

Sept 19 – Flex time

Sept 22 - Rothenberg, ed. White Privilege; read the essays listed below and use the questions on p 123 as a way of helping to focus your reading:
Stephanie Wildman & Adrienne Davis, “Making Systems of Privilege Visible” (95-102)
Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (109-114)

Revised draft of paper due

Sept 24 - View before class the PBS documentary “The Story we Tell,” Part 2 of the PBS series, *Race, the Power of an Illusion*

Sept 26 – (Provisionally scheduled) Visiting lecture by Professor Charles Nero

Sept 29 - “The Story We Tell,” PBS video part 2 (continued)

Oct 1 - Rothenberg, ed. White Privilege:

James Barrett & David Roediger, “How White People Became White” (29-34)

Neil Foley, “Becoming Hispanic” (55-66)

Karen Brodtkin, “How Jews Became White Folks” (41-54)

George Lipsitz, “The Possessive Investment in Whiteness” (67-90)

Oct 3 - (Provisionally scheduled) Library orientation with Reference Librarian Laura Juraska

Oct 6 – View before class the Marlon Riggs film, *Ethnic Notions*

Oct 8 - McBride, Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch Introduction: pp 17 - 31

Oct 10 - McBride, Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch pp Chapter 2: pp 59 - 87

Oct 13 - Further discussion of the question of difference and the paper on this topic

Oct 15 - **Fall Recess**

Oct 20 - *Class presentations and first draft of paper on Difference*

Oct 22 - View before class “The House We Live In,” Part 3 of the PBS series, *Race, the Power of an Illusion*

Oct 24 - “The House We Live In,” Part 3 of the PBS series, *Race, the Power of an Illusion*

Oct 27 - Randall Kennedy, Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word Introduction & chapter 1: pp xi - 44

Oct 29 – Kennedy, Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word Chapters 2, 3, & 4: pp 45 - 148

Oct 31 - *Debate*

Nov 3 - Roger Sanjek, The Future of Us All: Race and Neighborhood Politics in New York City (Introduction and Parts I & II: pp 1 – 115)

Schedule meeting this week with Julia to discuss your research prospectus

Nov 5 - Sanjek, The Future of Us All: Race and Neighborhood Politics in New York City (Part III: pp 117 – 212)

Nov 7 - *Debate*

Nov 10 - Sanjek, The Future of Us All: Race and Neighborhood Politics in New York City (Part IV: pp 215 – 393)

Nov 12 - Sanjek, The Future of Us All: Race and Neighborhood Politics in New York City

Nov 14 - *Debate*

Nov 17 - *Oral presentations of research paper prospectus*

Nov 19 – Rothenberg ed., White Privilege:

Tim Wise, “Membership Has Its Privileges: Thoughts on Acknowledging and Challenging Whiteness” (119-122)

Beverly Tatum, “Breaking the Silence” (127-132)

Paul Kivel, “How White People Can Serve as Allies to People of Color in the Struggle to End Racism” (139-148)

Turn in drafts of research prospectus

Nov 21 - *Debate*

Thanksgiving Recess

Dec 1 – Wrap-up

Dec 5 – *Portfolios due, including revised draft of research prospectus*