



CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Master 2: Lit. Civ - Literary Theory

Ms. BENIA

INTRODUCTION

- Critical race theory (CRT), includes studies of race in literature and culture, ethnicity studies, studies of minority literatures and specific traditions in literature and philosophy (such as Chicano/a or African American theories).
- Race and ethnicity are forms of **collective, communitarian identity**—one that is shared and not necessarily unique to an individual. Thus, issues of racial or ethnic identity involve questions of belonging, location, rights, citizenship, empowerment, welfare, affiliation, and could be the locus of discrimination, exclusion and oppression.
- It is less a ‘theory’ than a set of critical practices that examine issues of race and ethnicity. It is more accurate to position race studies as socio-political reading practices within legal studies, historiography, social theory and literary criticism. It has had significant impact within Cultural Studies—especially media studies, Black British studies, Asian American studies—around the world.

THE RACE TURN

The 'race turn' appears in social and cultural theory in the USA from around the turn of the nineteenth century. It was instrumental not only in developing a social theory about races and racism, but also in the rise of literary–cultural movements such as **Black Arts Movement** and the **Harlem Renaissance**.

Harlem Renaissance: It was a cultural, social, and artistic movement that emerged in the **1920s, in Harlem, New York**. It witnessed tremendous outpouring of creative enterprises—including black literature, music, painting, sculpture, philosophy, and political debate. It played a significant role in reshaping and celebrating African American identity and culture.

Black Arts Movement: of the 1960s marks the literary and artistic offshoot of the Black Power Movement. Some of the most vocal spokespersons for the movement, such as the poet Amiri Baraka, believed that black writers have an **obligation to help the race through such literary means as depicting the evils of racism, providing positive images of African Americans**, and offering possible solutions to social problems confronting the black community. Similarly, the Black Arts Movement affected the role of African American literary critics by emphasizing their job as cultural critics.

The Black Arts Movement also **called into question the appropriateness of white critical theories for the interpretation of black literature**. After all, it was a Eurocentric definition of “great” literature that marginalized black authors in American literary history and virtually excluded them from the American canon.

USEFUL TERMS

Racialism, refers to the belief in racial superiority, inferiority, and purity based on the conviction that moral and intellectual characteristics, just like physical characteristics, are biological properties that differentiate the races.

Racism refers to the unequal power relations that grow from the sociopolitical domination of one race by another and that result in systematic discriminatory practices

Institutionalized racism refers to the incorporation of racist policies and practices in the institutions by which a society operates, like education, governments, law practices, health care, employments and job opportunities, etc.

Intra-racial racism, which refers to discrimination within the black community against those with darker skin and more African features.

BASIC TENETS OF CRT

- ***Everyday racism* is a common, ordinary experience for people of color in the United States.**
- **Racism is largely the result of *interest convergence*, sometimes referred to as *material determinism*.**
- **Race is socially constructed.**
- **Racism often takes the form of *differential racialization*.**
- **Everyone's identity is a product of *intersectionality*.**
- **The experiences of racial minorities have given them what might be called a unique *voice of color*.**

D.E.B DU BOIS AND SOCIAL THEORY

Sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois, the first African American Ph.D. from Harvard, was a leading civil-rights activist of the early twentieth century. His *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) is now a classic in race studies.

Biological Determinism: Du Bois focused on the “scientific racism” of his age. Eugenics, Social Darwinism and Nazism combined racial prejudices with scientific theories that ‘**demonstrated**’ the **inferiority of the black race**. This scientific racism was based in biology and was a trend critiqued in race studies and feminist theory. It was also visible in aesthetic theories where black bodies and physiognomies were **marked as ugly, grotesque and even evil**. Du Bois disputed the view that the blacks were biologically inferior.

Social Constructivism: He argues that there is **no scientific basis** for such a belief—and that it was **more social than scientific**. Du Bois was clearly moving toward a **social constructionist view of race**, where race as a category is not scientifically demonstrable, but in fact emerges within **social discourses and practices**. Racial *difference* in biology does not, in this social constructionist view, validate racial *inferiority*.

DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

One of Du Bois' major insights was the idea of '**double consciousness**'. He argued that **the black could never see himself as himself**: He saw himself through the eyes of the white. That is, the African American perpetually saw himself as the white man saw him. This 'double consciousness' meant that the black man was **always 'two'**—a black man and an American.

It is the sense of being constantly aware of how one's identity is perceived and judged by those outside one's racial or cultural group which creates an internal conflict.

This phenomenon is a consequence of historical and social conditions such as slavery, racism, segregation, and systemic marginalisation.

BLACK AESTHETICS AND RACIAL MEMORY

Hoyt Fuller proposed that because the race worlds of the blacks and whites were so unlike each other and so separated, **there could be no compatibility or even conversation between the African American and the white American writer.** Black artists and writers would always be conscious of their being black, their history of slavery and their roots in a tradition very different from that of white America.

Larry Neal called for a *political aesthetic*: artistic and intellectual expressions that linked to community rather than individual. He argues that **Every artist must serve the aspirations of his community and tribe.** The use of **myth and folklore**—which are collective, shared, communitarian and *not* individual—is thus essential to the artist. Neal was arguing that there was no need to invent a black tradition; **such a tradition already existed as African American cultural heritage.**

Neal turns to African legendary and mythical figures like **the trickster** as **iconic of a black consciousness** that resists white interpretation. He locates the soothsayer, the griot, the sage as well as the specifically African dance rhythms, styles and music as black aesthetic.

RACIAL DIFFERENCE

Race has served as a **marker of difference**, a difference that **leads to slavery, exploitation and death**. While biological evidence for the superiority of one race or another has not emerged—or has been faulted—the social and political fields remain **embedded within discourses** that consistently, if subtly, deploy **race as difference**. Critical Race Studies examines these discourses and representational strategies of racial marking.

INTERSECTIONALITY

- The concept has been developed by Law professor Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in the late 1980s. It emerged from feminist criticism.
- Intersectionality acknowledges that various social categories, such as race, gender, class, and others, do not exist in isolation. Instead, these categories intersect and interact, shaping individuals' experiences in complex ways.
- Such persons will suffer oppression from more than one source and often have difficulty knowing the reason they are encountering discrimination in any given instance

TONI MORRISON: PLAYING IN THE DARK

- In her seminal non-fiction work, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison explores the ways in which Africanism—the representation of African and African American characters, culture, and identity—functions in American literature, particularly in the works of white authors.
- Morrison argues that “**Africanism**” is often used as a literary device by white writers to create a **contrastive image of whiteness**. She focuses on the implicit assumptions, stereotypes, and cultural dynamics embedded in literature which shape cultural perceptions.

FIRST PEOPLES

- The ‘**indigenist turn**’, as this shift may be termed is context-specific. It comes affiliated with social, legal and political movements seeking aboriginal rights, land rights, welfare and recognition.
- Aboriginal writing gestures at cultures of oppression (settlers) and their binary opposite, ‘cultures of survival’ (aboriginals) and recent critical theories emerging from within such a writing foregrounds survival, nature, spirituality, home/lands as concerns informing First Peoples cultures.



First Peoples' narratives often focus on the following concerns:

- Questions of home and questions of homelands are crucial to any interpretation of Aboriginal and First Peoples cultural practices.
- Home is more than a trope in these works. Women authors such as Paul Gunn Allen, for example, interrogate the gendered nature of the very space of home.
- They emphasize the displacement from which First Peoples have produced their cultural practices
- Narrative strategies within these cultures and writings ask us to approach them differently because they are based on a different world vision (of space, time, earth, creation).
- Historical narratives from within these traditions need not necessarily work at '**authenticity**', but more often than not focuses on mixed-blood ancestry and cultural hybridity.
- It is not possible to situate these works *only* within the oral traditions. They should be rooted within particular historical and political contexts because most of these texts exhibit remarkably similar political commitments.
- The emphasis on and privileging of pre-writing, orality and pictographic representation among First Peoples as 'authentic'

MULTIETHNIC CULTURE STUDIES

‘Mixed race’ studies emerged from three major contexts: **poststructuralism** and historical research, heightened **migration and the formation of multicultural cities** and populations, and the rise of **black and non-white public intellectuals**.

These intellectuals include both high-profile authors such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, and university professors such as Stuart Hall, Cornell West, bell Hooks, Kwame Appiah (All Black), Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha (Asian Origins), Gloria Anzaldua, Cherríe Moraga (Chicano)

“People like me who came to England in the 1950s have been there for centuries; symbolically, we have been there for centuries. I was coming home. **I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea.** I am the sweet tooth, the sugar plantations that rotted generations of English children's teeth. **There are thousands of others beside me that are, you know, the cup of tea itself** ... Not a single tea plantation exists within the United Kingdom. This is the symbolization of English identity – I mean what does anybody in the world know about an English person except that they can't get through the day without a cup of tea?

Where does it come from? Ceylon – Sri Lanka, India. **That is the outside history that is inside the history of the English. There is no English history without that other history.**” (2000: 147)

-Stuart Hall

“Caged Bird” by Maya Angelou

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn
and he names the sky his own.

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.