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024 Murray Hall
Hours: Thursdays by Appointment

350:655 - Seminar: African American Literature and the Left

Course No: 350:655

Index # - 36479

Distribution Requirement: A4, A5, C, D

Monday - 1:10 p.m.
MU 207

Overview

Can we come to grips with the ambitions, aesthetic achievements, or socio-political commentaries of African American letters in the 1930s and 40s in the absence of a complex and detailed accounting of its ties to the CPUSA and the Old Left? In the aftermath of the Cold War, works by critics like Barbara Foley, James Smethurst, and William Maxwell have answered this question with an unequivocal ‘no,’ and have also given the triumph of New Criticism a sound drubbing for its departure from the philological, biographical, and history-of-ideas modes of literary criticism that make such an accounting possible. Moreover, critics like Foley have convincingly argued that New Criticism's heralding of showing over telling and of texts that held opposed ideals in equal balance not only led to the relative dismissal of ‘politicized’ African American literature, but was also part and parcel of an elitist cultural trend that sought to squelch the social and socialist concerns that marked both literature and literary criticism during the Third Period and the Popular Front. At the same time, critics like Mark Naison have asked the daunting question, how can we come to grips with the communist and socialist dimensions of African American literature from the 1930s and 40s when “manipulation, disillusionment, and betrayal” are the three dynamics through which political historians have typically viewed black encounters with Communism? Pointing to numerous reasons why both African American writers (like McKay and Wright) and critics (like Harold Cruse) faulted the party for its failure to adequately address the complexities of the ‘race problem’ in the United States, thinkers have called our attention to the need to address the ways that the ‘failures’ of communism stultified African American literary development, and, conversely, to how the achievements of African American letters helped to reshape American communism.

It is not the goal of this course to demonstrate or refute the roles played by American socialism and communism in the growth of African American letters during the 1930s and 40s notwithstanding the influence they exerted. Rather, while acknowledging

these tendencies within the critical literature, our purpose will be to engage in processes of discovery and experimentation that critically illuminate this body of work, to the extent possible, by avoiding preconceived ideas about its ‘catalysts’ in order to examine individual texts with a fresh lens. We will explore canonical texts penned by African American authors with strong and soft ties to the Old Left—including William Attaway, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lloyd Brown, Sterling Brown, Chester Himes, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Ann Petry, George Schuyler, Alice Walker, Margaret Walker, and Richard Wright—and pay special heed to the ways in which these authors staged, rethought, and re-worked leftist doctrine both to address the specific concerns of the African-American population and to foment competing and overlapping strains of black nationalism. At the same time, we will explore how these authors’ texts defy all-too-easy classification as ‘protest literature,’ and investigate ways in which they speak to each other as well as to a desire to enrich specifically African American literary traditions. In the course of our exploration, we will contextualize the literary production of the African American Left in light of its affinities (or lack thereof) with other international literary Lefts, but we will also endeavor to read these works as inheritors of a distinctly African-American tradition of literary militancy populated by figures like Martin Delany and Sutton Griggs. Themes and topics will also include: African American re-workings of the place of race and gender in Communist ideology; the extent to which our primary texts can be read as an archive of the complex historical relationship between the Communist Party and the African-American Literary left; the arguably distinct manner in which African-American authors framed the Revolutionary potential of the *lumpen* proletariat; and the role of violence in social protest.

In addition to their engaged participation, students are required to submit a substantial final paper (15-20 pages) and to give two in-class presentations.

Seminar Learning Goals

- a) To attain scholarship and research skills pertaining to African American literature and the Left.
- b) To engage and conduct original research
- c) To be prepared to be professionals in your discipline

Schedule

1) September 9- Course Introduction

2) September 16- Blake (1859-1862) by Martin Delany

a) “Martin Delany’s ‘Blake’ and the Transnational Politics of Property” by Jeffery Clymer

b) “The Revolutionary Novels of Martin R. Delany and Sutton Griggs” by Roger Whitlow

c) “The Lexicon on Rights, Power, and Community in *Blake*: Martin R. Delany’s Dissent from Dred Scott” by Gregg Crane

3) September 23- Imperium in Imperio (1899) by Sutton Griggs

a) Karl Marx introductory reader

b) “Oratory, Embodiment, and U.S. Citizenship in Sutton E. Grigg’s *Imperium in Imperio*” by Maria Karafilis

b) “Karl Marx on Slavery” by Ken Lawrence

4) September 30- Banjo by Claude McKay (1929)

a) New Negro, Old Left by William J. Maxwell

5) October 7- Black No More (1931) by George Schuyler

a) “The Negro Art Hokum” by George Schuyler

b) Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination by Robin Kelley (Optional)

6) October 14- Southern Road (1932) by Sterling Brown

a) “Negro Folk Expression: Spirituals, Seculars, Ballads and Work Songs” by Sterling Brown

b) Chapters 1 and 2 of The New Red Negro

and

For My People (1942) by Margaret Walker

a) “Belonging to History: Margaret Walker’s *For My People*” by William Scott

b) “Southern Song: An Interview with Margaret Walker” by Lucy Freibert

7) October 21- Selected 1930’s poetry by Langston Hughes

a) Chapter 3, 4 and 5 of The New Red Negro

b) “My Adventures as a Social Poet” by Langston Hughes

8) October 28- Native Son (1940) by Richard Wright

a) “Blueprint for Negro Writing” by Richard Wright

b) Radical Representations (Part 1) by Barbara Foley

9) November 4- Blood on the Forge (1941) by William Attaway

a) “Migration, Material Culture, and Identity in William Attaway’s *Blood on the Forge* and Harriette Arnow’s *The Dollmaker*” by Stacy Morgan

b) “From Pastoralism to Industrial Antipathy in William Attaway’s *Blood on the Forge*” by Philip Vaughn

c) Radical Representations (Part 2) by Barbara Foley

10) November 11- Selected Poems by Gwendolyn Brooks

a) Chapter 6 and 7 from The New Red Negro

- 11) November 18- If He Hollers Let Him Go (1945) by Chester Himes
 - a) “Negro Martyrs are Needed” by Chester Himes
 - b) “The Quest for the American Dream in Three Afro-American Novels: If He Hollers Let Him Go, *The Street*, and *Invisible Man*” by Richard Yarborough

- 12) November 25- The Street (1946) by Ann Petry
 - a) “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!” by Claudia Jones
 - b) “Buried Alive: Gothic Homelessness, Black Women’s Sexuality, and (Living) Dead in Ann Petry’s *The Street*” by Evie Shockley

- 13) December 2- Iron City (1951) by Lloyd Brown
 - a) Black Marxism by Cedric Robinson

- 14) December 9- Meridian (1976) by Alice Walker
 - a) The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual by Harold Cruse