

**“They’ve Gotta Have Us”:  
African American Film and Literature from Black Power to *Black Panther***  
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Module Description:

In a 1976 essay on film and racism, James Baldwin outlined the paradox of the black performer in American culture. ‘The [film] industry is compelled,’ he writes, ‘given the way it is built, to present to the American people a self-perpetuating fantasy of American life [...] And the black face, truthfully reflected, is not only no part of this dream, it is antithetical to it. And this puts the black performer in a rather grim bind.’

Over forty years later Baldwin’s concerns about the ‘antithetical’ position of African Americans in American culture remains prescient, evidenced by widespread cases of fatal police shootings and the mass incarceration of black men, incidents that have sparked the Black Lives Matter movement. In this same cultural moment, however, Ryan Coogler’s *Black Panther* (2018) grossed \$1.3 billion in the box office, making it the 10<sup>th</sup> biggest film release of all time. What are the terms of Baldwin’s ‘grim bind’ in 2019? How does contemporary African American art respond to, critique and rewrite the ‘self-perpetuating fantasy of American life’? Where is the boundary between entertainment, art and activism?



This module will engage these questions by tracing dominant currents and concerns in the development of African American film and literature from the 1960s to the present. Bringing together work by black filmmakers, authors, poets, essayists and cultural theorists, we will explore how these texts respond to the complex political, commercial and aesthetic movements of their times. In doing so we will investigate how key political and intellectual concepts — from Black Power to intersectional feminism, Black English to the ‘post-racial’, Afro-pessimism to Afro-futurism — have influenced contemporary African American art. Combining close textual analysis with broader political and cultural readings, we will consider how African American art moves between the identities of ‘antithetical’ and national, often reflecting, sampling, and ‘signifyin(g)’ its own history and aesthetics in its interrogation of American cultural forms.

Weekly Schedule:

**Please note that this schedule is provisional and subject to change. More details about required and suggested texts will be made available closer to the course start date.**

**Week 2**

**Liberal Fantasies**

James Baldwin, ‘My Dungeon Shook’ (1963); extracts from *The Devil Finds Work* (1976); ‘Previous Condition’ (1948)

*In the Heat of the Night* (Norman Jewison; 1967)

Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*

- Week 3**      **Power and Pastiche**  
*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (Melvin Van Peebles; 1971)  
*Killer of Sheep* (Charles Burnett; 1978)  
Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972)  
Henry Louis Gates Jr. 'The Signifying Monkey and the Language of Signifyin(g)' and 'On "the Blackness of Blackness": Ishmael Reed and the Critique of the Sign' in *The Signifying Monkey*
- Week 4**      **The Site of Memory**  
Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987)  
*Daughters of the Dust* (Julie Dash; 1991)  
Barbara Smith 'Towards a Black Feminist Criticism'  
Hortense Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book'
- Week 5**      **Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: Black Film in the 1990s**  
*She's Gotta Have it* (Spike Lee; 1986)  
*Sidewalk Stories* (Charles Lane; 1989)  
Trey Ellis, 'The New Black Aesthetic'(1989)  
bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*
- Week 6**      **Reading Week**
- Week 7**      **Talkin' Black**  
Selection of poetry and essays by Zora Neale Hurston, Sonia Sanchez, Gwendolyn Brookes, Maya Angelou, and June Jordan  
Alice Walker, *The Colour Purple* (1982)  
*Boys N the Hood* (John Singleton; 1991)  
John Russell Rickford, selections from *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English*
- Week 8**      **Intersections: Art and Activism**  
Audre Lorde, selections from *Sister Outsider* (1984)  
*Fruitvale Station* (Ryan Coogler; 2013)  
*I am Not Your Negro* (Raoul Peck USA; 2017)  
Hilton Als, 'Triste Tropiques' in *White Girls* (2013)  
Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, *Friday Black* (2018)
- Week 9**      **Genres**  
Colson Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* (1999)  
*US* (Jordan Peele; 2019)  
Roxanne Gay, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Yona Harvey, *World of Wakanda* (2016)  
Octavia Butler, selected stories from *Bloodchild* (1984)  
Samuel Delaney, 'Racism and Science Fiction' (1998)
- Week 10**      **Lyrical Futures**  
Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014)  
*Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins; 2016)  
Jared Sexton, 'Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word' (2016)