

Dr Tessa Roynon

Lecture 2: African-American Literature: An Introduction

Recommended Reading on the Slave Narratives/Slavery

Primary Texts

Philp S. Foner, ed. *The Life and Wrting of Frederick Douglass*. 5 vols, New York: International Publishers, 1950-1971.

Henry Louis Gates Jr., ed. *The Classic Slave Narratives*. New York: Penguin, 1987.
[including *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789 in England; 1791 in the USA) + *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave* (England, 1831), as well as the Douglass Narrative and the Jacobs]

William Wells Brown. *Narrative of Williams W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself*. 1847.

Booker T. Washington. *Up From Slavery*. 1901.

Oral History:

Belinda Hurmence. *My Folks Don't Want Me to Talk About Slavery. : Twenty-one Oral Histories of North Carolina Slaves*. Winston-Salem, N.C.: John F. Blair, 1984.

James Mellon. *Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember. An Oral History*. New York: Grove Press, 1988.

Fictional Treatments of American Slavery (by white and black authors) :

Harriet Beecher Stowe. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. 1852.

Herman Melville. "Benito Cereno". 1855/56

Mark Twain. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. 1884.

Margaret Walker. *Jubilee*. 1966.

Ernest J. Gaines. *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. 1971.

Alex Haley. *Roots*. 1976.

Sherley Ann Williams. *Dessa Rose*. 1986.

Toni Morrison. *Beloved*. 1987.

Edward P. Jones. *The Known World*. 2003.

Key African-American text between the Slave Narratives and the Harlem Renaissance:

W. E. B. Du Bois. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903.

Secondary Texts on the Slave Narratives

Andrews, William L. *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*. Urbana: U of Illinois Press, 1986.

- - -, ed. *Critical Essays on Frederick Douglass*. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1991.

Carby, Hazel V. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1987. (esp. 40-61)

Foster, Frances Smith. *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives*. 2nd ed. 1979. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1994.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. Introduction to *The Classic Slave Narratives*. (see above)

McDowell, Deborah E., and Arnold Rampersad, eds. *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989.

Morrison, Toni. "The Site of Memory". 1987. repr. in Morrison, *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*. Ed. Carolyn C. Denard. Jackson: Uof Mississippi P, 2008. 65-80.

Smith, Valerie. Introduction to Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. (Schomburg Library edition.) New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987.

Sundquist, Eric, ed. *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990.

Yellin, Jean Fagan. "Written By Herself: Harriet Jacobs's Slave Narrative". *American Literature* 53 (1981): 479-86.

A Very Small Selection of Secondary Material on African-American Literary Traditions

Andrews, William L, Frances Smith Foster & Trudier Harris, eds. *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*. New York and Oxford: OUP, 1997.

Baker, Houston. *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984.

Braxton, Joanne & Andrée Nicola McLaughlin. *Wild Women in the Whirlwind : Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance*. London: Serpent's Tail, 1990.

Carby, Hazel V. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1987.

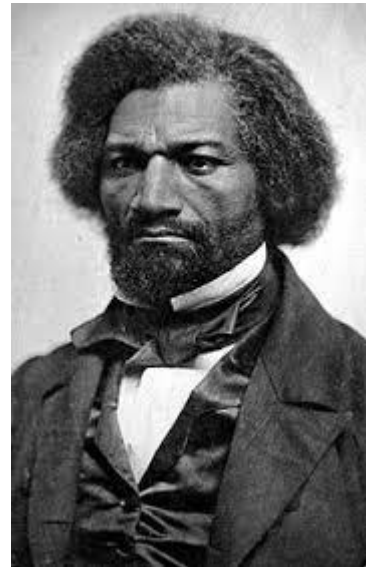
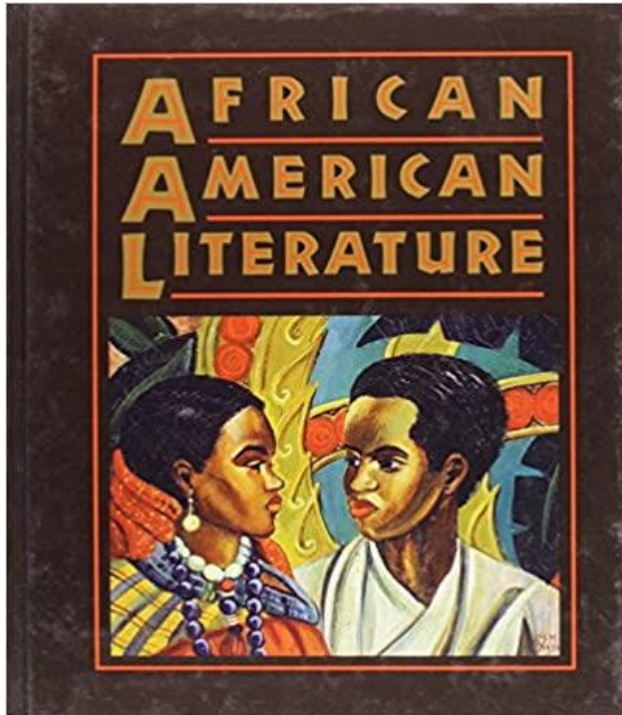
Gates, Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. New York and Oxford: OUP, 1988.

Graham, Maryemma, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*. Cambridge: CUP 2004. (and on-line)

Invaluable Anthologies

Bell, Bernard et al, eds. *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998.

Gates, Henry Louis and Nellie Y. McKay, eds. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. New York: Norton, 1997.



A FEW KEY DATES IN AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND LITERATURE, 1600-1900 (source: Jonathan Earle, *The Routledge Atlas of African American History*, 2000):

- 1619** Dutch merchant delivers 20 Africans to Jamestown colony in Virginia
- 1641** Massachusetts becomes first North American colony to legalize slavery
- 1773** Former slave Phillis Wheatley publishes her poetry collection – first book to be published by a black person in America
- 1789** Olaudah Equiano publishes his narrative, *The Interesting Narrative ...* [one of the first published slave narratives]
- 1808** Foreign slave trade officially banned by US Constitution
- 1845** Frederick Douglass publishes his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass ...*
- 1861** American Civil War begins. Harriet Jacobs publishes *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*
- 1863** President Abraham Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation (which declares slaves to be ‘forever free’)
- 1865** Civil War ends (Lincoln assassinated)
- 1866** Congress passes 14th Amendment granting citizenship to African Americans
- 1896** In *Plessy vs Ferguson*, the US Supreme Court upholds Jim Crow (pro-segregation) law as constitutional

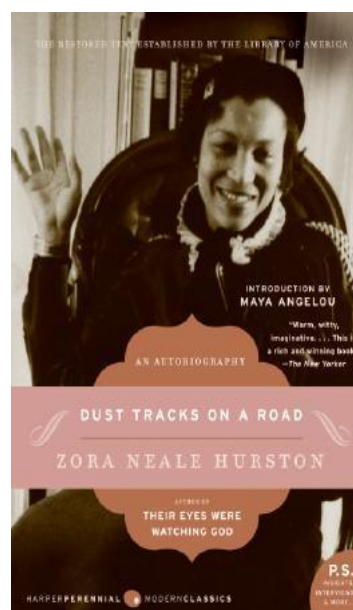
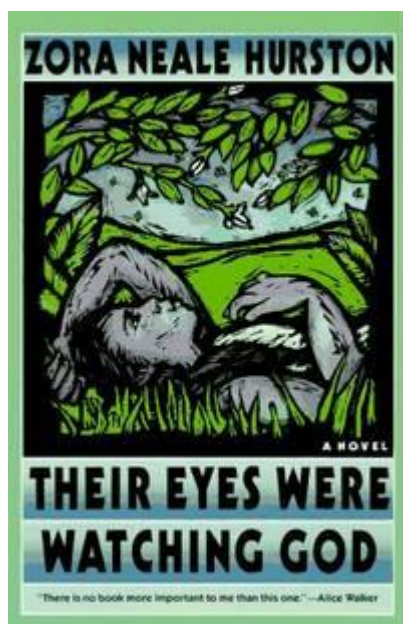
A) From Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written By Himself* (1845)

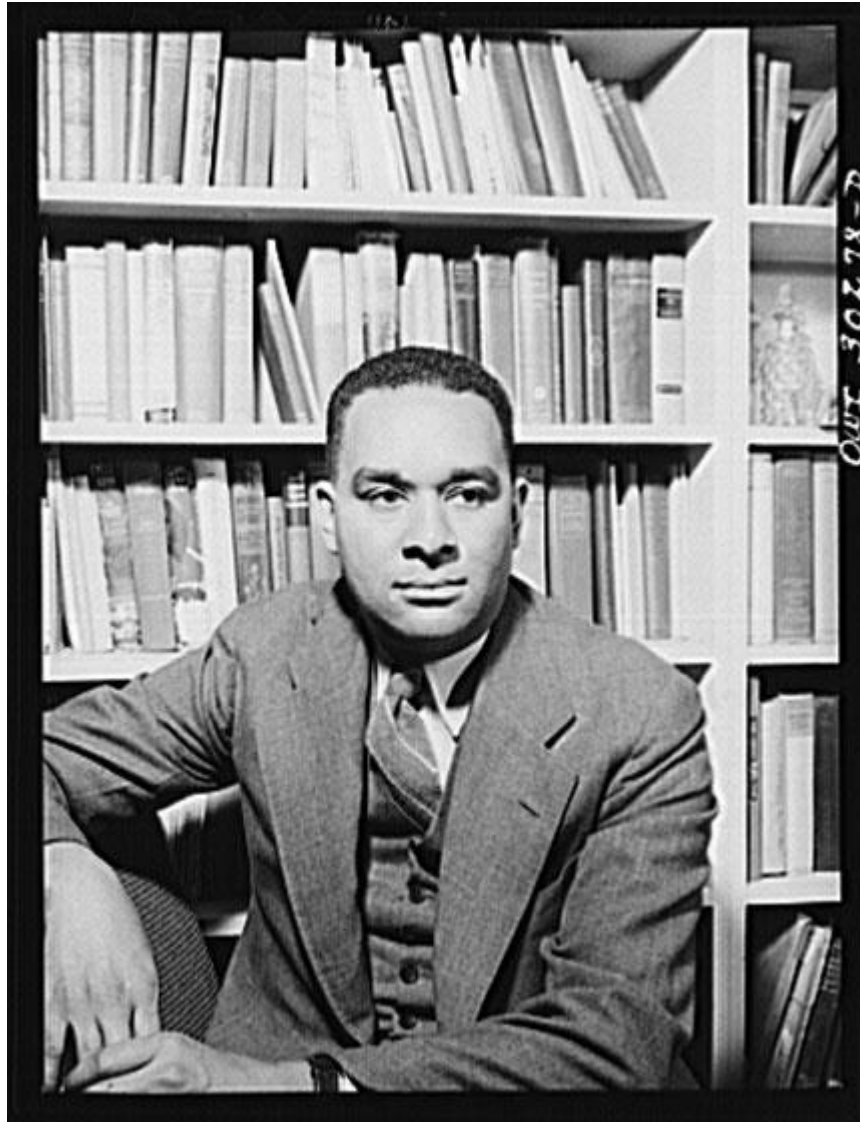
Very soon after I went to live with Mr and Mrs Aumld, she kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. 'If you teach that [***], speaking of myself, how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave'. ... 'These words sank deep into my heart, and stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought.

B) Zora Neale Hurston. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. (1937) London: Virago, 1994; 10.

Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men.

Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly.





E) Richard Wright. *Native Son*. (1940) New York: HarperPerennial, 1998. 429-30.

Bigger grasped the bars with both hands.

‘Mr Max . . .’

‘Yes, Bigger.’ He did not turn round.

‘I’m all right. For real, I am’.

‘Goodbye, Bigger’.

‘Goodbye, Mr Max’.

Max walked down the corridor.

‘Mr Max!’.

Max paused, but did not look.

‘Tell . . . Tell Mister . . . tell Jan hello. . . .’

‘All right, Bigger’.

‘Goodbye!’.

‘Goodbye!’.

He still held on to the bars. Then he smiled a faint, wry, bitter smile. He heard the ring of steel against steel as a far door clanged shut.

F) Richard Wright. “How Bigger was Born”. Repr. in *Native Son*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1998; 459.

Wherever possible, I told of Bigger’s life in close-up, slow-motion, giving the feel of the grain in the passing of time. I had long had the feeling that this was the best way to ‘enclose’ the reader’s mind in a new world, to blot out all reality except that which I was giving him.

[. . .] Throughout there is but one point of view: Bigger’s. This, too, I felt, made for a richer illusion of reality.

I kept out of the story as much as possible, for I wanted the reader to feel that there was nothing between him and Bigger; that the story was a special premiere given in his own private theater.

G) Toni Morrison, from “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation”. 1984. Repr. in Morrison, *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*. Ed. Carolyn C. Denard. Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 2008. 56-64.

[. . .] I don’t regard Black literature as simply books written by Black people, or simply as literature written about Black people, or simply as literature that uses a certain mode of language in which you just drop *g*’s. There is something very special and very identifiable about it and it is my struggle to find that elusive but identifiable style in the books. [. . .] it seems to me interesting to evaluate Black literature on what the writer does with the presence of an ancestor. Which is to say a grandfather as in Ralph Ellison, or a grandmother as in Toni Cade Bambara, or a healer as in Bambara or Henry Dumas. There is always an elder there. [. . .]

If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn’t about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfils only the obligation of my personal dreams – which is to say yes, the work must be political. [. . .] It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time.

H) Robert Hayden (1913-82) - “Frederick Douglass”

When it is finally ours, this freedom, this liberty, this beautiful
and terrible thing, needful to man as air,
usable as earth, when it belongs at last to all,
when it is truly instinct, brain matter, diastole, systole,
reflex action; when it is finally won; when it is more
than the gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians:
this man, this Douglass, this former slave, this Negro
beaten to his knees, exiled, visioning a world
where none is lonely, none hunted, alien,
this man, superb in love and logic, this man
shall be remembered. Oh, not with statues’ rhetoric,
not with legends and poems and wreaths of bronze alone,
but with the lives grown out of his life, the lives
fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing.

National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington DC

