

“Tomorrow words today”:

Future visions in present-day literary discourses about race, racism, and the racial imaginary



Photo credit: still from *The Last Angel of History* (John Akomfra, 1996)

This is a seminar about contemporary works of poetry, drama, and social criticism that aim at constructing the future today, in the belief that the future speaks to us today—or even, as June Jordan seems to imply in her elegant phrase “*tomorrow words today*,” that the future “words” our present; it creates, by way of telling, our present.

We will look at several African-American authors who engage the difficult but important task of analyzing present-day race relations, and do so in the open-ended, inclusive framework of social dialogue and collective examination. We will read works that dwell in the fertile middle ground between visionary hope and sober realism, radical self-expression and the telling of collective history, lyrical writing and social dialogue, literature and the interdisciplinary fusion of philosophy and history.

We will begin our seminar (four weeks) discussing the question of literature as a double agent of social analysis and future social imagination. We will also discuss the foundational question of race (in particular, the binary of “blackness” and “whiteness”) as a socio-historical and economical construct and consider contemporary responses to the experience of living in a highly complex “racial imaginary.” In this connection, we will read Tracy Fessenden’s essay, “The Soul of America” (1999) together with short selections from Nell Irvin Painter’s *The History of White People* (2011), Achille Mbembe’s *Critique of Black Reason* (2013, tr. 2017), Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s *The Undercommons* (2013), Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake* (2016), and the anthology curated by Claudia Rankine, Beth Lofreda, and Max King Cap, *The Racial Imaginary* (2015). As deep background, we will also look at some philosophical writing about hope.

In the heart of the semester (ten weeks) we will read, in poetry, Claudia Rankine’s *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* (2004) and *Citizen* (20015), Tracy K. Smith’s *Life on Mars* (2011), and Fred Moten’s *The Feel Trio* (2014). In drama, we will read Khadijah Queen’s *Non-Sequitur* (2015). The brand-new anthology of mixed-genre writing, *Letters to the Future* (2018), edited by Erica Hunt and Dawn Lundy Martin, will enhance our survey.

We will close the semester (one week) with Janelle Monáe, a songwriter and performer who most spiritedly embodies “tomorrow words today.”

Seminar participants will write weekly responses and a final research project that develops out of the weekly readings.