Writing the Body

Module Convenor:

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Module Description:

This module explores representations of the body through a focus on twentieth century African American literature and culture. The module introduces students to a variety of literary, historical and cultural contexts ranging from early slave narratives to the Harlem Renaissance, the civil rights movement and beyond. The module will also introduce various theories of the body which can be used in a wide range of contexts, including feminist writing on beauty, critical approaches to race, and theories of witnessing, pain, and visual culture.

A key concern of this module is the intersection of literature with other art forms so we will consider literary writing by authors such as Toni Morrison, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston and Ralph Ellison alongside radio extracts by Alice Walker, photography by Carrie Mae Weems, and music by Louis Armstrong, Nina Simone and Billie Holiday. No prior knowledge of African American writing is required for this module.

Preparation for the Module:

Primary texts: Please purchase or borrow a library copy of the primary texts listed below in advance of the module (these editions are preferred but not required). These texts are also a good place to start your preparatory reading for the module:


Secondary reading: Scanned copies of secondary texts and further reading lists can be downloaded from the VLE. The ‘Eyes on the Prize’ documentary (14 episodes) gives a very useful introduction to the African American civil rights movement. It is available here:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n945ffvrixY
Module Overview:

For a full weekly reading list including secondary texts please email the module convenor.

1. Why study the body? African American contexts and beyond


2. Slave Narratives and the Body in Pain


3. Flesh, Scars and the Body as a Site of Memory


4. Scientific Racism and Visual Displays of the Body


5. Looking Closely: Their Eyes Were Watching God


6. Violence and Witnessing: Literatures of Lynching

Billie Holiday. “Strange Fruit.” 1939.

7. Masculinity and Invisibility

Louis Armstrong. “(What did I do to be so) Black and Blue.” 1929.

8. ‘Black is Beautiful’ and Beyond