AFRICAN AMERICAN NOVELS OF THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY: A
SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH, fall quarter 2009

Tuesday and Thursday, 9:30 – 10:50, University Hall 318; Wendy Griswold, Professor
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Office hours are Thursday mornings 11 – 12:30, and we can arrange other times as well. You
should set up appointments by e-mail first. For quick questions you can always catch me right
before or after class for consultations in the hall.

This seminar focuses on three masterpieces of mid-twentieth century African American fiction:
Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Richard Wright’s *Native Son*
(1940), and James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953). We will examine the racial,
sexual, and gender contexts in which these writers produced their novels. We will look at the role
played by institutions, both literary (e.g. the Federal Writers Project) and social (e.g. the African
American church). We will consider the role of regions and communities: Hurston’s South,
Wright’s Chicago, Baldwin’s Harlem. We will look at readership and reading practices to
understand the audience for these novels. And first and foremost, we will read closely and
analyze the novels themselves to understand why they have been judged to be exemplary works.

Books for required reading

  Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1937. *TEWG* We are using the Harper Perennial
  are using the Harper Perennial Modern Classics edition (2005).
  We are using the Modern Library edition (1995).

Expectations

- Regular and on-time attendance
- Participation in class discussions
- Written work edited and on time

Writing assignments

Students will write three short papers (4-5 pages), one on each novel, and one longer paper (5-8
pages) in which they develop a theme that relates to all three books. The second short paper will
be collaborative, i.e., written by teams of two or three students.

Evaluation

- 3 short papers: 45%
- 1 long paper: 30%
- Class participation 25%
Day-by-day schedule

Tuesday, September 22
Discussion: Introductions. What we should get out of this seminar? What we should put into it?
Sociological topic: Books and sociology: what is the connection?
Assignment: Read TEWG 1 – 5 for Thursday

Thursday, September 24
Discussion: TEWG 1-5
Sociological topic: Before the Great Migration: Black and White in the South
Assignment: Read TEWG 6-10 for Tuesday

Tuesday, September 29
Discussion: TEWG 6-10
Assignment: Read TEWG 11-15 for Thursday

Thursday, October 1
Discussion: TEWG 11-15
Sociological topic: Literary reputations and rediscoveries: The case of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston.
Assignment: Read 16-20 for Tuesday

Tuesday, October 6
Discussion: TEWG 16-20
Sociological topic: Black women as writers and readers. Reading groups
Assignment: Paper due on Thursday

Thursday, October 8  PAPER #1 DUE TODAY
Discussion: Discuss TEWG papers. Introduction to NS.
Sociological topic: The Great Migration
Assignment: Read NS Book 1 (3-93) for Tuesday

Tuesday, October 13
Discussion: NS Book 1 (3-93)
Sociological topic: The Black Belt in Chicago, and the sociologists who studied it
Assignment: Read NS Book 2 (97-184) for Thursday

Thursday, October 15
Discussion: NS Book 2 (97-184)
Sociological topic: The Federal Writers’ Project under the New Deal
Assignment: Read NS Book 2 (184-270) for Tuesday
Tuesday, October 20
Discussion: NS Book 2 (184-270)
Sociological topic: Communism and intellectual life in the 1930s
Assignment: Read NS Book 3 (273-363) for Thursday

Thursday, October 22
Discussion: NS Book 3 (273-363)
Sociological topic: Race and incarceration then and now
Assignment: Read NS Book 3 (363-430) for Tuesday

Tuesday, October 27
Discussion: NS Book 3 (363-430)
Sociological topic: Race and reading: Who reads?
Assignment: Paper (team paper) due on Thursday

Thursday, October 29  PAPER #2 DUE TODAY
Discussion: Discuss NS papers. Introduction to GTIM.
Sociological topic: The Great Migration: African Americans leave the South
Assignment: Read GTIM Part 1 “The Seventh Day” for Tuesday

Tuesday, November 3
Discussion: GTIM Part 1 “The Seventh Day”
Sociological topic: The Harlem Renaissance: What was it, why did it happen, why was it important, what are its legacies?
Assignment: Read GTIM Part 2-1 “Florence’s Prayer” for Thursday

Thursday, November 5
Discussion: GTIM Part 2-1 “Florence’s Prayer”
Sociological topic: Harlemworld: Harlem as cultural capital of Black America
Assignment: Read GTIM Part 2-2 “Gabriel’s Prayer” for Tuesday

Tuesday, November 10
Discussion: GTIM Part 2-2 “Gabriel’s Prayer”
Sociological topic: The Black Church, South and North
Assignment: Read GTIM Part 2-3 “Elizabeth’s Prayer” for Thursday

Thursday, November 12
Discussion: GTIM Part 2-3 “Elizabeth’s Prayer”
Sociological topic: The Black Church and the Civil Rights Movement
Assignment: Read GTIM Part 3 “The Threshing Floor” for Tuesday

Tuesday, November 17
Discussion: GTIM Part 3 “The Threshing Floor”
Sociological topic:
Assignment: Paper due on Thursday

Thursday, November 19  PAPER #3 DUE TODAY
Discussion: Discuss GTIM papers. Topics for final papers/reports
Sociological topic: Race/sex/class/sexuality and literature-- review
Assignment: Work on final paper/report

Tuesday, November 24
Discussion: Oral presentation of topics for final papers
Sociological topic: Place, region and literature -- review
Assignment: Work on final paper

Thursday, November 26
HAPPY THANKSGIVING

Monday, November 30
Reading period this week; no class

Monday, December 7
FINAL PAPERS DUE TODAY