The Help

- Watch this clip and reflect on the social construction of race:
  - How is ‘blackness’ being constructed at the micro and macro level? Pay attention to language, social interactions, etc.
  - How is ‘whiteness’ being constructed in relation to ‘blackness’? Pay attention to language, assumptions, the unsaid, etc.
Race and some of its intersections in *The Help*

- **race system**
- **gender system**
- **people of colour** serve white people
- preference for female domestic workers
- gendered division of labour
- **white middle-class women** hire African-American women as domestic help
- American men abdicate responsibility for child-care and domestic work
- political & economic legacies of slavery
- no govt. childcare provisions
- liberal state
- global capitalism
  - enables middle-class lifestyle for white families
  - middle-class lifestyle for white families
“Interrogating Whiteness”
Shelley Fisher Fishkin
Critical Whiteness Studies

• Fishkin’s work emerges in the 1990s as many fields begin to interrogate whiteness, marking a defining moment in the study of American culture.
The American Lit Canon

- American literature in the canon is predominantly “white” i.e. written by white people.
- African-American literature is considered “black” i.e. written by black people.
- Contemporary African-American literature might now be added to a pre-existing white canon that historically did not include African-American lit.
- In English departments, courses in “American Literature” seldom include African-American writers.
- Only in “Black Studies” departments could students take courses on “African-American Literature.”
Fishkin’s intervention

• Fishkin argues that “black speakers and oral traditions played an absolutely central role in the genesis of *Huckleberry Finn*” (975), published in 1885, signaling the beginning of modern American literature

• Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens) was the first writer to use vernacular dialects of local people in Mississippi

• if his work is influenced by Black authors, it also went on to inspire many Black writers in the 20th century

• For Fishkin, this means that the canon of American literature is not just white but also Black at its very roots
WASHINGTON (NYT)—The reading list for English 112 is familiar: Hawthorne, Melville, James Fenimore Cooper, T'wain.

But for many students and faculty members at Georgetown University, the appearance of a course titled “White Male Writers” this semester is as surprising as it is revealing.

“This is just one small group within a large body of literature, so let’s title it that,” said Valerie Babb, the assistant professor of English who originated the course. “Just as we say native American writers, just as we say black women writers, these are white male writers.”

At a time when many universities, like Georgetown, have revised survey literature courses to include less familiar but equally important works of minorities and women and have added courses devoted to those authors, Professor Babb’s focus on the traditional canon is unusual.

But Lucy Maddox, chairwoman of the English department, said the new course had effectively placed the books of white men on the same academic level as books by minority or female writers, which are being taught both in specific courses and in more general courses, like 19th-century American literature.

As a group, white male authors are often treated as if their sex or race had no influence on their works, Professor Maddox said, but added that in reality “white men are as defined by their race and gender as black women are.”

Professor Babb said the course distinguished the way that sex and race affect the writers’ strategies, “such as ambivalence, voice, tone and diction.” Students also examine how each man changed American perceptions of minority groups.

Professor Babb noted, for example, that Cooper helped define the way that America thought about Indians. He had very little contact with Indians, she said, but felt free to write about them and to place them low in his hierarchy of American races. Because his books were so popular, those perceptions pervaded the culture.

Professor Maddox said the title of the new course drew considerable attention from students and faculty members, many of whom asked “whether it was real.” Their reaction, Professor Maddox said, was itself a statement about the English curriculum. “That title should be no more unexpected than ‘black women writers,’” she said.

But their surprise was understandable, Professor Maddox said, since white male writers are usually studied under the generic heading of “literature,” while works by minority groups have been “tagged” by the race or sex of the author. The first class of 35 students in English 112 was almost evenly divided between men and women—“a very nice mix,” Professor Babb said.

But some of her male students say they have been reluctant to contribute to class discussions.

“I feel like if I were to say something in defense of a white male writer, I would have a hard time defending that position because it would be attacked from a lot of different points of view,” said Tim Delaune, a sophomore from Titusville, Fla., majoring in government.

Delaune said he was initially afraid that the class would be “white male writer bashing.” Although Professor Babb has not taken that approach, he said, some women in the class have made what he called attacks on the works.

But students like Eric Hayot, a second-year junior in English from Cleveland, said there was often little to defend. “Cooper is obviously an unbelievable racist,” Hayot said, referring to the introduction of “The Last of the Mohicans” in which Cooper ranks the races according to their pre-eminence in American society.

Professor Babb, who concentrated on American 19th-century literature in graduate school, said she did not think it was unusual that she, a black woman, would teach a class on white male writers.

“Who would know white men better than a black woman?” she asked. “I’ve got a legacy of great-grandmothers and grandmothers who cleaned house, washed clothes, diapered babies for white males; I’ve got a rich store of information. My entire education has come from what might be called a white male culture.”
Defining Whiteness

- Whiteness ‘never has to speak its name’ (976)
- Whiteness ‘never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations’ (976)
- American culture is presumed to be ‘white’ culture, so there is no need to use the adjective ‘white’ to describe literature, writers, culture, or authors
- Whiteness is the presumed norm or standard when no adjective is given
(in)visibility of whiteness

• Whites are assumed not to have a race
• Whiteness makes itself invisible by refusing to name itself
• “The ‘whiteness’ that had previously been largely invisible in the stories we told about who we were suddenly took center stage as the site where power and privilege converged and conspired to sabotage ideals of justice, equality and democracy” (977)
• This new visibility puts whiteness forward to be studied critically, to interrogate its function in sustaining racial norms and divisions
social construction

• Whiteness is both (1) the universal signifier and (2) the invisible unspoken standard
• Whiteness is socially constructed as a race
• Being white influences a person’s opportunities, education, economic status, literary style, etc.
• The social construction of whiteness shapes American literature, culture, history, politics, etc.
• When whiteness is depicted, it shows itself in literature as good and benevolent
  o e.g. Huck Finn in Mark Twain’s writing
  o e.g. Skeeter Phelan - the non-racist white person in The Help
• Question: is there a role for “anti-racist white allies” in Black liberation movements?
Sh*t white girls say... to black girls
interconnectedness

- Blackness and whiteness, rather than separate domains, are strongly interconnected
- for example, both Black and white writers in the American Renaissance wrote about the struggle against slavery, and were mutually influential
- Toni Morrison argues that critics must study the influence of African-American literature and culture on the fiction, language, structure and style of American literature by white people
  - e.g. Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* demonstrates a clear interest in African customs and linguistic uses
  - e.g. T.S. Eliot’s work is strongly influenced by Jazz music
rebellious white authors

- use of Black language and alliances with Black culture by white authors such as T.S. Eliot, Jack Kerouac (and many others) allows a double imperative:
  1. they demonstrate a rejection of or challenges to the sovereignty of British culture
  2. they guarantee their own success within the culture that they write about rejecting
Afropunk

- the Black punks talked about the history of Black music and how it influenced Rock’n’Roll and eventually punk music
  - e.g. Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Jimi Hendrix, etc.
  - e.g. reggae influences on punk
  - e.g. Bad Brains
# intersections of whiteness

## CLASS & POVERTY

- shame of poverty associated with whiteness when it is assumed that white people are all middle class or wealthy
- e.g. the term ‘white trash’ implies that poverty is inherently non-white

## GENDER

- feminism started as a movement dominated by white middle-class women challenging domestic roles and entering the work force
- women of colour, who have always worked, have different struggles
invention of white race

- ethnically diverse Euro-Americans united into one single ‘imagined community’ of race
- through advertising, Hollywood, wild west shows, and minstrel shows
- institutionalized racism
- created the fiction of whiteness
- racialization of policy, experience, opportunities and rewards
## critical whiteness studies

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| - aims to re-center, reclaim and rearticulate experiences of ‘Others’ who have been defined in opposition to whiteness, and on whom whiteness depends for its stability | - aims to de-center, destabilize and rearticulate whiteness  
- destruction of category ‘whiteness’ |
The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique on the Sign and the Signifying Monkey by Henry Louis Gates