

Black Existentialism

Books: Jean-Paul Sartre, *Antisemite and Jew*; Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*; Richard Wright, *Eight Men*

Contact: Professor John Drabinski @ Cooper House 104 | Email: jdrabinski@amherst.edu | hrs. MW 10:30-11:30

The course: This course introduces one of the most important and potent mid-century intellectual movements, the existentialist movement, through a series of black Atlantic thinkers. Our keystone will be Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, which is arguably the most important work of Black existentialism from this period. Across the semester we will see why existentialism, with its focus on the ambiguities and ambivalences of lived-experience, had such a deep impact on Black thinkers across the diaspora. We will see these existentialist insights register in literature, philosophy, and film. Old and new.

Method of evaluation: Attendance is mandatory in this course. Upon missing your third course, that and each subsequent absence will result in a 1/3 grade deduction from your final grade.

Participation is also mandatory. Your presence in class, your questions and inquiries, your criticisms and skepticisms, your responsiveness to student colleagues and the professor (that's me!) – all of this creates a sense of intellectual community. Community is paramount. Without it, this is just an exchange of information. With it, this is a shared endeavor that will alter our understanding of the world for the better.

Also: participation is **20%** of your grade.

Two essays of 6-8 pages will be assigned. Each will be worth **30%** of your final grade.

The remaining **20%** of your grade will come from two short online writing exercises through Moodle.



Readings: Here is a list of readings for the semester. Read closely and come prepared with questions. With only a few exceptions, the readings are intentionally kept short. This is so that you can read with precision and give the material plenty of thoughtful consideration.

There will be times when the material doesn't make a ton of sense. Here's the thing: keep reading. Even just looking at the words, even when the page looks like a scramble of strange vocabulary, you will understand better simply for having spent time with the text.

In class, we will examine passages in detail, hear bits about each figure's historical moment and significance, and of course will ask, always, about the enduring significance or non-significance of a thinker's reflections on race, politics, and the meaning of existence in an anti-Black world. We will mix short lecture, long discussion in order to prioritize, simultaneously, conceptual precision and concrete engagement.

3 September

Intro 2 course

5 September

Du Bois, *Souls*, Ch 1 PDF

10 September

Sartre, *Antisemite and Jew*, 7-58

12 September (add/drop ends)

Sartre, *Antisemite and Jew*, 59-153

17 September

Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Intro & Ch 1

19 September

Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Ch 2

24 September

Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Ch 5

26 September

Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Ch 7-8

01 October

Fanon, "West Indians and Africans" PDF

03 October

Fanon, "Racism and Culture" PDF

08 October

Sartre, "Black Orpheus" PDF

10 October

Césaire, "Culture and Colonization" PDF

15 October (fall break)

17 October

Discussion of Sembene's film *Black Girl*

22 October

Wright, "The Man Who Lived Underground"

24 October

Wright, "The Man Who Was Almost A Man"

29 October

Discussion of Johnson's film *Native Son*

31 October

No class

05 November

Davis, "Lecture on Liberation" PDF

07 November

Discussion of Burnett's film *Killer of Sheep*

12 November

Lamming, "The Negro Writer and His World" PDF

14 November

Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression"

19 November

Ellison, "Preface" to *Invisible Man*

21 November

Walcott, "The Muse of History" PDF

26 November (thxgiv)

28 November (thxgiv)

03 December

hooks, "Postmodern Blackness" PDF

05 December

Discussion of *Moonlight*

10 December

Final conversation