Course description

Whiteness is the lynchpin of structures of racial meaning and racial inequality in the United States: to preserve whiteness is to preserve racial injustice. Whiteness is a fiction, albeit one with real material effects. In this course we will examine the historical development and contemporary dynamics of racial inequality through the lens of white privilege. We will endeavor to ‘make whiteness strange’ – that is, to interrogate whiteness as an unstable legal, political, social, and cultural construction that confers both material and psychological benefits to individuals who identify, or are identified, as white.

Our readings and concepts will be drawn from the fields of political theory, critical race theory, social science, critical legal studies, critical cultural studies, and twentieth- and twenty-first-century American literature.

The course will be comprised of four units in which we examine (1) the advantages that attach to whiteness, the protection that colorblind and post-racial ideologies offer white privilege, and the legal and political construction of whiteness; (2) how white privilege and white normativity anchor relations between various racial and ethnic groups in the contemporary United States; (3) the concept of structural racial inequality and the ways in which the policies and practices that have produced residential segregation, the racial wealth gap, concentrated black poverty, and the carceral complex have also produced, protected and enhanced white privilege; and (4) how fiction and nonfiction literature by James Baldwin, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Danzy Senna illuminate whiteness as a ‘lie’ that sustains racial inequality.

Over the course of the quarter our texts, discussions, and media screenings will allow us to consider such question as: What is white normativity, and how does it interact with other normative orders, including male normativity and heteronormativity? How do the premises and tropes of ‘colorblind’ and ‘post-racial’ doctrines and discourses obscure white privilege and sustain racial inequality? How do Americans of color – including African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and mixed-race and multiethnic Americans – experience and negotiate skin privilege and white normativity? How can we develop self-critical racial identities and approaches to experiences of skin privilege? What would it take to dismantle whiteness, and what would whites and beneficiaries of skin privilege lose in this process? How do we examine whiteness in a way that de-centers rather than re-centers it? What can literature convey about whiteness and racial hierarchy that academic texts cannot?