The Performance of Race

Course Description: The focus is on various kinds of performance, with a particular emphasis on the way racial difference accentuates or distorts performance. Major theoretical resources would include Jean-Paul Sartre and his discussions of “the gaze” and “bad faith” in Being and Nothingness and in Anti-Semite and Jew, Frantz Fanon’s discussions of the same topics in Black Skins, White Masks, and Irving Goffman’s theories of performance in The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life and Stigma. Sartre, Fanon, and Goffman discuss various types of performance, but from different angles. Sartre’s negative critique of bad faith encourages a type of scrupulous (and exhausting) pursuit of authenticity, Fanon surveys the bleak landscape of corporeal incoherence in the face of the racialized gaze, and Goffman describes both narcissistic “impression management” as well as “team” performances that are symbiotic and aid in the stabilizing of social networks. In addition, the Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie opens up new avenues of performance for analysis, from the aggressively political verbal performance to the undertheorized female “performance” of hair and clothing choices. The theorists discussed encourage us to read everyday actions and dispositions, including those that apply to race, class and gender, not as inflexible and “given,” but as relatively freely chosen dramaturgical processes: this means they are amenable to editing, change, and re-orientation.

Grading scheme: 2 essays (30% each) and one presentation (40%); required texts (3) are available at the Bookstore. Copies of the remaining texts will be available at the Center and can be photocopied before class.

Week 1: Assimilative, disruptive and transformative performances: Selvon (handout), Adichie’s Americanah; assimilative performances, Sartre on “bad faith,” and Goffman on “teams” and collaborative performances.

Week 2: Sartre and Goffman

Week 3: Layers of racial performance: Fanon and corporeality as negating activity; Iris Marion Young and female embodiment; Sartre and “the look.”

Week 3: Sartre, “the look”; Philippe Rochat and “others in mind.”

Week 4: Always performing: Sartre in Anti-Semite and Jew, Fanon in BSWM, Goffman in Stigma, Butler and anxious repetition

Week 5: Always performing: Sartre in Anti-Semite and Jew, Fanon in BSWM, Goffman in Stigma

Week 6: Disruptive performances in Americanah; speech and racialized performance: Kristeva and Cixous and failed speech.

Week 7: Embodied disruptive performance in Americanah: hair, clothes and accent as components of performance

Week 8: Hair, clothes and accent as components of performance; using social media as a performative space

Week 9: The performance of the stigmatizer: Diderot, Rousseau, Mandeville, Norbert Elias, Goffman

Week 10: Diderot, Elias, Goffman

Weeks 11 and 12: Student presentations