

Div Lit Week 2: Orientation and some framing concepts:
Social Construction and Intersectionality

Discussion 1: Exploring constructions of race

1. Objectives of class:

- Explore the idea of social construction
- Introduce and illustrate the social construction of race through the text
- Get students to reflect on their own constructions of race
- Start students talking about race in non-threatening way

2. Material:

- **Morrison, T. (1983) Recitatif. In A. Baraka and A. Baraka (Eds) *Confirmation: An anthology of African-American women*. New York: William Morrow and Co. Inc. (p. 243 – 261) (in reader)**

"'Recitatif' was an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial," writes Toni Morrison in her Preface to *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. "Recitatif" is a pioneering story in racial writing as the race of Twyla and Roberta are debatable. Though the characters are clearly separated by class, neither is affirmed as African American or Caucasian.
(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recitatif>)

3. Method:

- Ask class to tell you about the two girls in the story: "There are two girls in the story. Tell me about them. How would you describe them racially?"
- Note that one is black, one is white. You know this because of reference to "salt and pepper" etc.

	Twyla	Roberta
	Mom is a dancer	Mom is sick
	Mom doesn't bring lunch	Mom brings lunch
		People like her smell funny
	Can read	Can't read
	Waitress	Glamorous, bug hair, with 2 men

	Doesn't want to speak to Twyla
	Jimi Hendrix
Poor, live in poor suburb	Rich, live in rich suburb
Husband a fireman	Husband an IBM type
	Didn't want to be seen with a white/black person
	Hated it when Twyla touched her hair
	Had servants
Thought Maggie was white	Thought Maggie was black

- Notice class reasoning. For example: Roberta is black. She can't read, smells funny.
- Then say “So you know she is black because she can't read and smells funny. Do you know she is black? Was there reference to her skin colour?” The answer is NO
- Ask “But how do you know? What makes you say this girl is white and this one is black? **HOW DID YOU DO THAT?**”
- Insert theory: Social signifiers, associations, social resources, which mean “black” **YOU ARE CONSTRUCTING RACE!!**
- Ask “What happened as you read the story? Can you picture the girls and the women? did their race change at all through the story”
- Note something about how it worked for you e.g. “They did for me. e.g. I was convinced Roberta was black when they were children, but when Twyla saw her in the diner I saw a white woman... my image of her changed? Why?”
- Insert theory: The power of social markers, meaning inscribed in neutral bodies.... bodies “change” according to meaning inscribed on them.