It is a great irony of history and geography that Africa, whose land mass is closer than any other to the mainland of Europe, should come to occupy in the European psychological disposition, the farthest point of otherness, should indeed become Europe’s very antithesis.

(Chinua Achebe)

The guiding premise of this class is rather straightforward: the understanding of the self and of culture as it emerges in European modernity is dependent on both a conception of the other and an idea of human progression. Therefore, we will explore how this relationship between self and other works within a specific dynamic: we will compare Europeans describing Africa with Africans describing Europe and the United States. In this way, we will be able to glimpse at the complex cultural legacies that have grown out of the triangular relationship between Europe, Africa, and the United States, which was and still is strongly punctuated by the trading of human beings as goods and its ideological justifications. Our exploration will raise many issues that are tied to some of the basic tenets that we attach to the idea of the self as it relates to larger categories of identification. These categories include: race, gender, religion, progress, development, “primitivity,” freedom, and the historical subject. As our concentration will reside in the realm of the cultural, we will read novels, watch film, and listen to music from England, France, Trinidad, Martinique, Sudan, South Africa, Cameroon, Nigeria, and the United States. All readings will be in English.