Cultures & Contexts: The Black Atlantic
Core-UA 534
Silver 206
9:30am-10:45am T - Th
Fall 2018

Professor Autumn Rain
Department of Social and Cultural Analysis

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This syllabus and lecture materials will be made available in alternative formats upon request.
Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities.
Please contact NYU’s Henry and Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (Phone and TTY: 212.998.4980) to establish eligibility and to coordinate reasonable accommodations. The Center is located at 726 Broadway, 3rd Floor, New York, NY 10003. For additional information please refer to its website: http://www.nyu.edu/csd/.

This course introduces students to “The Black Atlantic” as a concept and pragmatic force in the world through careful discussion of the texts and ideas through which it is constituted. Our inquiry concerning “The Black Atlantic” will be guided by five conceptual questions:

The Question of Structure
How do people build and sustain social systems?

The Question of History
How is a social system transformed?

The Question of Historicity
How do people register social transformation?

The Question of Subjectivity
What makes us who we are?

The Question of Alterity
What makes us different from each other?
Topics to be discussed include slavery, colonialism, capitalism, freedom, and justice. This course will explore these themes through sustained engagement with the trans-Atlantic slave trade and its aftermath. This course will explore these developments through the lens of historical events that include the experience of capture and transport, the work of slave labor, the fights for Emancipation, 19th and 20th century colonialism, Jim Crow, and Freedom Movements, and finally the contemporary struggles over what this history has meant and how to remember it.

This course explores the Black Atlantic as a socio-cultural and economic space from the fifteenth-century arrival of Africans in the ‘New World,’ through the rise of slavery in the Americas, continuing on to slave emancipation and decolonization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and concluding with contemporary black life in the Atlantic world. While it is organized historically, it is not a comprehensive history of the Black Atlantic. Rather, the intention here is to introduce students to important moments in the history of the Black Atlantic and to engage, through interdisciplinary writings, with questions of meaning-making. How are pasts, as “history” made meaningful in the present and how is lived experience patterned by these past and present social processes? During this class we will trace the origins and importance of the concept of the Black Atlantic in the context of European imperial expansion, paying special attention to the social relations that shaped community formation among people of African descent and laid the foundations for their political and economic institutions.

You should leave this course with an introduction to the overlapping phenomena that comprise the history of the African Diaspora—modern economies, race, cultural practices, religious beliefs, and the mobilizing of power to construct, maintain, oppose and/or transform racial and economic hierarchies. You should also leave here with a clear understanding of what it means to write and read both critically and analytically.

Course Requirements

**Required Readings**
All of the readings listed below are required to be completed prior to our class meetings on the day they are assigned. The readings will help you to contextualize the lecture, and you will have the opportunity to discuss them closely in recitation section. While the course is organized historically, we will encounter readings from a range of disciplines and thus it is important to approach each reading with a clear sense that you are responsible for understanding its positionality. *Please take careful reading notes on all texts.* They—your notes—will be very important for exams.
The following texts are **required** and are available for purchase at the NYU bookstore and/or digitally through the NYU library.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon, 2012)
- ISBN-10: 0807080535

- ISBN-10: 0812218736

Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016)
- ISBN-10: 0822362945

Michael L. Nicholls *Whispers of Rebellion: Narrating Gabriel's Conspiracy*
- ISBN-10: 0813935091

The following texts are **recommended** and are available for purchase at the NYU bookstore and/or digitally through the NYU library.

Larent Dubois and John D. Garrigus (eds.) *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean: A Brief History and Documents*
- ISBN-10: 1319048781

CLR James *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*
- ISBN-10: 0679724672

Vince Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery*
- ISBN-10: 0674057120

Phillip J. Schwarz (ed) *Gabriel's Conspiracy: A Documentary History*
- ISBN-10: 0813932955

Various articles and chapters are posted on NYUClasses or accessible through a library search engine. If there is more than one reading per session, please read in the order they are listed on the syllabus.

☆ Please note, when you have a reading from NYUClasses you are **required** to print it out and bring it with you to class and recitation. Failing to do so will seriously affect your class participation grade.

It is your responsibility to keep copies of all written work and to regularly check NYUClasses for any updates or changes to the course schedule.

**Recitation Participation**

Recitations are an opportunity for you to more deeply engage with the assigned readings and with the ideas presented in lectures. It is also an opportunity for students to both contribute to and benefit from guided conversations around these readings. As such, participation in recitation constitutes a significant part of your final grade and should be taken seriously. Come to recitations
with a notebook and your reading notes. Be prepared to contribute to an active conversation with your peers.

**Out of Classroom Assignments**
You will be asked to consider the relationships between the built environment, historic representations, and lived experience by engaging in out of class assignments that will inform weekly response papers.

**Writing Assignments**
You have a series of written assignments due over the course of the semester. These assignments are designed to support our work in the classroom and recitations and must be handed in on time. It goes without saying that all written work must be original, any plagiarism will result in an “F” in the course.

Plagiarism will not be tolerated in any form. Please read NYU’s statement on Academic Integrity here: [http://cas.nyu.edu/object/bulletin1012.ug.academicpolicies#ACADEMIC](http://cas.nyu.edu/object/bulletin1012.ug.academicpolicies#ACADEMIC), and visit Northwestern University’s website [http://www.northwestern.edu/uacc/plagiar.html](http://www.northwestern.edu/uacc/plagiar.html) on avoiding plagiarism for a comprehensive discussion of what plagiarism entails.

Both your response papers and the longer Critical Essay must be written using standard Chicago Manual of Style (also known as Turabian) citation form. This form uses footnotes for references, not parenthesis. Citation format is quite specific—even if you believe that you know how to construct your citations use this website [http://library.duke.edu/research/citing/within/turabian.html](http://library.duke.edu/research/citing/within/turabian.html) as a starting point.

You have short recitation response papers **due each week** beginning September 17. These should be **250-350 words, less than 2 pages**. It is a challenge to write succinctly. Drawing on the reading assignments from the previous week, choose a quote you found particularly relevant. Relate the quote to your critical reflections on out of class assignments and/or class discussion. Response papers will be due on Monday evenings, beginning on September 17.

You also have a longer final **critical essay** on the question of Memorialization. **This is a 7-10 page** essay due the final day of the semester.

There will be a midterm and a final exam. We reserve the prerogative to administer short quizzes, without notice

**Final Grades**
Recitation Participation and Response Papers 30%
Final Paper 30%
Exams 40%
Technology in the Classroom
It is not clear to us that using a laptop to take notes is the best way to process information. Whether taking notes on a keyboard or by hand is the best strategy is open for debate, what is not debatable is the fact that a computer screen is a powerful lure and can distract even the most well intentioned student. When you start to zone out in the multicolored glow of your screen it is always clear to us that you are no longer paying attention. Checking email, watching texts come in, posting on social media, or reading the news is also distracting to those sitting next to and behind you. We reserve the right to limit or prohibit laptop use as needed.

Week 1
September 4th and 6th
Defining Terms Key Questions: What factors have shaped the development of the Black Atlantic concept in the 20th and 21st centuries? How does the Black Atlantic function as history and as a way of structuring contemporary meaning?

LECTURE: Who “We” Are – Positionalities, Time, Space and Origin Stories
Readings

Week 2
September 11th and 13th
Historicity and the Black Atlantic Key Questions: How should we approach the slave trade? Are questions of morality relevant to the historical study of African enslavement in the New World? When did the Black Atlantic become institutionalized as a way to discuss the plight of African-descended peoples? How, when and from whose perspectives are diasporic relationships constituted? Is it about cultural transmissions and retentions? What evidence should scholars use to establish diasporic connections? What is the role of history in relationship to heritage and identities?

LECTURE: Making Human Commodities
Readings

LECTURE: Making Meaning Out Of Experience
Readings

- Olaudah Equiano’s. 1789, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself*, Chapters 1 and 2 [NYUClasses]

Week 3
September 18th and 20th

**Economic systems as cultural systems** What does Enslavement mean? What does slavery “MAKE”? How does the story of enslavement get told? What alternatives are there to the stories that we may already know?

**LECTURE:** What Slavery Produces—Crops

Readings


**LECTURE:** What Slavery Produces—Identities

Readings

- Phyllis Wheatley. 1838. *Poems of Phyllis Wheatley: A Native African and a Slave*, [Bobst]  On Being Brought from Africa to America, Ode to Neptune, To a Lady on her coming to North-America, An Hymn to Humanity, To SM a Young African Painter…

Week 4
September 25th and 27th

**Freedoms Forged and The Force of Law**

What factors led to the Haitian Revolution? What were the connections between events in France and Saint Domingue in the revolutionary era? What is the relationship between Freedoms in the Americas and Colonialism on the African Continent? What is the relationship between Freedom and Slavery? What is the role of force in constituting the Black Atlantic? How was the deployment of force instrumental for shaping the social aspirations and political possibilities of peoples inhabiting the world of the Black Atlantic?

**LECTURE:** The Haitian Revolution: Thinking through the “Unthinkable”

Readings

The Black Atlantic


Recommended readings:
- The Haitian Constitution, 1805. NYU Classes.

**LECTURE:** The Wake: Reverberations of the Haitian Revolution

**Readings**
- Anne Eller, "How History has been Distorted to Justify Dominican Deportation" on webpage Africa is a Country: [https://africasacountry.com/2015/06/how-history-has-been-re-written-to-justify-the-dominican-deportations/](https://africasacountry.com/2015/06/how-history-has-been-re-written-to-justify-the-dominican-deportations/)

**Recommended reading:**

**Week 5**
**October 2nd and 4th**

**Ideological Roots and Reverberations: Architectures of “Freedom” and “Humanity”**

*Question:* What is the relationship between the infrastructure of legalized enslavement and the emergence of “modern” civil society? How does slavery underpin some of our most important modern institutions? Those of banking, insurance, education, etc. How do we understand legacies, responsibilities, even reparations in an Atlantic context?

**LECTURE:** The Idea of Race, Humanity and Freedom

**Readings**
- Visit understandingrace.org / read the timelines

**LECTURE:** Financial and Carceral Reverberations
Readings

Week 6
October 9th [NO CLASS]
October 11th
LECTURE: Guest Lecture: Kofi Baku

Week 7
October 16th and 18th
Scramble for Africa

Question: Does the end of the trans-Atlantic slave trade signal new relationships between Europe, the Americas, and Africa? What are the relationships between Empire and Culture? How is Africa rendered in the Western imaginary in the 20th century in ways connected to and distinct from earlier imagery?

LECTURE: Acquisitions Of Africa—scrambles.

Readings
- *The Treaty of Berlin (1885)*

LECTURE: Disposable populations and genocidal experiments.

Readings
Week 8
October 23 and 25th
Renaissances and Nationalism—Culture and Anti-Colonial Critique
*What are the relationships between an African past and the notion of a collective present? How do Diasporic peoples produce and defy 20th century racial solidarity?*

October 23
**LECTURE:** Pan-Africanism and Freedom Movements
Readings

October 25

**Midterm Exam, in class**

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Week 9
October 30th & Nov 1
Religion in the Black Atlantic

**LECTURE:** Lived Experience and the Quotidian in Sacred Expression
Readings

**LECTURE:** Historical Identities, Trajectories and Representation in Heterodox Traditions of the Black Atlantic
Readings

**FILM SCREENING IN RECITATIONS:** Órî (Beatriz Nascimento & Raquel Gerber, 1989)
Week 10
Nov 6th and 8th
Creativity, Commerce, and Consumption in the late-20th through 21st Centuries

What is racial capitalism in the contemporary moment? What is Post-Racialism? What can afro-billionaires of the black Atlantic tell us about capitalism, race and ideology? Given what we have learned about the transatlantic slave trade, how have configurations of racial capitalism changed over time? What do the readings suggest about how racial capitalism is organized now? How do you view the concept of ‘post-Blackness’ in light of national and global formations of capital? Is the concept valid? Why or why not?

LECTURE: RACIAL DEMOCRACY AND RACIAL HIERARCHY IN BRAZIL
Readings

LECTURE: History, Heritage and Identities
Readings
- Christina Sharpe, In the Wake, Chapter 4, “The Weather,” 102-134.
- Touré, “Keep It Real is a Prison,” in Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness? What it Means to be Black Now (Free Press, 2011). [NYU Classes]
- http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111903927204576574553723025760.html
- ‘From Marcy to Barclays’: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g69xgeH6DHg ‘Life and Times: Barclays Documentary,’; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBvyEGQeHnk

Week 11
Nov 13th and 15th
Remembering Resistance

How has resistance to slavery been remembered within the African Diaspora? What are the power relationships that emerge and shape these processes?

LECTURE: Gabriel’s Rebellion, Virginia
Readings
Michael L. Nicholls, Whispers of Rebellion
LECTURE: Valongo, Rio de Janeiro
Readings
TBA

Week 12

Nov 20th [No Classes held 23rd--Be Thankful]

LECTURE: Consuming Pleasures—Shopping and Travels
In Recitations. Film Viewing; Stephanie Black. Life and Debt, (New York: New Yorker Video, 2003)
Readings

Week 13
Nov 27th and 29th
Reparations and Redress
What debts are owed? Can any of them be repaid? Should the afterlife of slavery be compared to other losses?
Are balance sheets even possible here? What is the relationship between economies built on slavery and contemporary understandings of wealth, well being, poverty, and economic exclusions? What are “moral reparations”?

LECTURE: Measuring Gains and Losses

LECTURE: What does it mean to consider reparations?
● Ta-Nehisi Coates, The Case for Reparations.
● Ana Lucia Araújo, “Introduction” in Public Memory of Slavery.
Week 14

December 4th and 6th

Historical Reclamation

How do we remember the dead? What are the power relationships that emerge around commemoration, of naming the heroes and the victims of history? What is produced by marking sacred ground? What constitutes a memorial? How do memorials transform histories and identities? How are human remains mobilized in reclaiming sacred spaces?

Lecture: Defending the Dead


Lecture: Reflections on Charlottesville, Jamaica, and NY City. Remembering and memorializing


Week 15

Dec 11th and 13th

The Black Atlantic or The Diaspora … ?

How do we tell this story? What is the importance of critical language when describing historical phenomenon?

LECTURE: Defining Diasporas/Telling Histories

- Brent H. Edwards, “The Uses of Diaspora” Social Text, 66 (Volume 19, Number 1), Spring 2001, pp. 45-73
- Michelle Stephens, “What Is This Black in Black Diaspora?,” Small Axe, Number 29 (Volume 13, Number 2), June 2009, pp. 26-38
Re-Circulations

What are some of the intellectual and affective (emotional) difficulties of grappling with the slave past in the contemporary moment? How does one accept tragedy without losing sight of hope for a liberatory political future?

LECTURE: The Complicated Notion of Home

Readings