

Cultures & Contexts: The Black Atlantic

Core-UA 534

9:30am-10:45am T/Th
60 5th Avenue, room 150
Fall 2021

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Office hours: Tuesdays 11-1 in my personal zoom meeting room
<https://nyu.zoom.us/j/2125809583>; or socially distant in person (please contact
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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/>.

We should start with a question—what do we mean by the “Black Atlantic”? This course introduces students to the history of an aspect of the African Diaspora and to its cultural, economic, and oppositional consequences. It differs from a history of the African Diaspora—which would be concerned primarily with mapping the dispersals of African and African descendent peoples throughout the world—in that our core concerns are the particular relationship between Africa, Europe, and the Americas and the various ideological, political, and cultural consequences of that relationship as it circles back, forth, and around the Atlantic Ocean.

In order to answer this question, we are going to be reading across a range of academic disciplines. These include History, Economics, Anthropology, Literature, and Philosophy. As you read and participate in class, identifying the disciplinary interventions that we are encountering should be high on your list for class preparation.

The course is organized both historically and geographically—we move from the 15th century forward and from Africa to Europe, the Americas, and back again. What we will learn is not comprehensive, but should provide you with a clear understanding of some of the core issues that both propel African people into the Atlantic and determine their experiences once in the Americas.

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. We 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 and Freedom Movements, and finally the contemporary struggles over what this history has meant and how to remember it. This is the *Social History* piece of what is essentially an interdisciplinary approach to our explorations this semester.

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. The intention here is to introduce you to important moments in the history of the Black Atlantic and to engage, through interdisciplinary writings, with questions of **meaning-making**. This is the *Philosophy/Cultural Studies* piece of the course (there are others, watch for them).

Each week will we examine a distinct time and place, but there are thematic threads that link the lectures, readings, and discussions and that should guide you through the semester. The questions or themes throughout revolve broadly around **Culture, Economies, and Opposition**.

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 both construct and oppose 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 in an historical mode.

Final Notes

The subject matter of this course deals consistently with histories of racism and racial violence. Your enrollment in this course is an indication of your willingness to engage in these topics—in lectures, recitations, and our course materials. Our readings will hit each of you differently, but you should be aware of the fact that you will confront difficult language, images, and ideas over the course of this semester.

This semester we will be convening in person for the first time in over a year. For some of you this is a return to customary practice, for many, this is the first time you will sit together with your classmates and instructors; for all of us this will, at the very least, start out strange. Let us all be patient with one another, and work to make the most out of this semester. Should any concerns arise, please feel free to discuss them with us.

Course Requirements

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

Readings

All of the readings listed below are required and must to be completed prior to our class meetings **on the day they are assigned**. The readings will help you to contextualize the lecture and to participate in class discussion. Please take careful reading notes on all texts. They—your notes—will be very important for class discussion and your writing assignments.

All of our readings are available either as digital downloads through Bobst or as pdfs available on our NYUBrightspace site through the **Resources** link. We will be reading most or all of two texts: Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake*, and Julius Scott's *The Common Wind*. They too are available digitally, but you may want to purchase them. Under the resources, I have divided the readings between primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are those generated in the historical time period that we are studying; secondary sources are scholarly analysis. Please be certain that you understand which type of text you are reading at any given time. If there is more than one reading per session, please read in the order they are listed on the syllabus.

Assignments

During some weeks, you will have a group forum assignment listed. These **MUST** be completed by 6pm on Tuesdays, they are preparation for Wednesday's recitation meetings.

Class Participation

Please remember that your participation in class is a crucial part of whether our collective time together will be productive or not. "Participation" means coming to lecture and recitations prepared, having read the readings and, when applicable, each others' postings. It means having some questions prepared, and some observations about the text already worked out. It means actively listening to lectures and to one another and making connections both to the readings and conversations happening during our meeting time

and to those that have happened in the past. Simply saying something in class does NOT constitute excellent class participation.

Forum Posts: At a number of times during the semester you will be asked to engage a source in your small group forums. Each student must post a substantial thread (two paragraphs) addressing the source. After submission, you will be able to view the submissions of your classmates. You must then comment on the submissions of two of your classmates. A good response post adds further to the discussion. Forum post grades are discussed below.

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](#), and visit Northwestern University’s website 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> as a starting point.

Response papers

You have short **response papers to the week’s reading** due each week in advance of your recitation. You can take a pass on up to 4 of them, in other words, at the end of the semester you must have submitted 10 responses. You may not double up (submit two responses in one week) without permission from your TA. The first two will follow the template you will find on NYUBrightspace, and the first two are **BOTH REQUIRED**. Afterwards, please write them without using the template. These should be 250-350 words, less than 2 pages. It is a challenge to write succinctly. These are due by midnight on Wednesdays.

Final Project You also have a longer final critical essay on the question of Commemoration. This is a 7-10 page essay due the final day of the semester. This essay should draw on relevant readings from this syllabus as well as 3-5 additional readings (articles or chapters) to augment your work. The prompt for this essay asks you to consider recent controversies around commemoration in the Black Atlantic world and to link those controversies with historical questions.

Exams There will be a mid-term and a final exam. These are short-answer written exams that will draw exclusively on lecture content. You will be given 12-14 questions, from which you may choose 10 to answer. Be prepared for these exams by attending all lectures and taking comprehensive lecture notes.

Grading Rubrics

Reading Responses

Excellent

The response is intellectually sophisticated and engages with the content appropriately and in-depth. The response extends the discussion beyond the material (i.e., it is more than a restatement and summary of reading materials). The response provides support for positions and opinions taken with direct references to the assigned text.

Good

The response is intellectually sophisticated and engages with the content appropriately and in-depth. The response does not extend the discussion beyond presented material, or it may not provide sufficient support for positions/opinions taken.

Acceptable

The response is mostly a restatement or summary of the content with some justification, and it is too short. There may be a few original ideas, but they are not developed or elaborated on substantially.

Forum Posts

Your response should add *a new perspective*, ask *clarifying questions*, *connect to the readings or web links*, and most importantly, *stay on the course's topics*. It is fine to agree or disagree with your colleagues, but you must *provide evidence* for your perspective from the readings (please provide citations to the readings) to support your point of view. In some cases, you may use your personal experience as evidence; however, when bringing in your experience, it should be to support or to critique a reading. Remember that the idea for the forum is that we are having an asynchronous conversation about the course themes, so your active participation with your peers over the week is needed!

Comments on Peer Posts

Excellent. A comment that analyzes the peer's post and extends the discussion in new ways that integrates content and provides justification. It extends the discussion beyond the presented material (i.e., it is more than a restatement and summary of reading materials). It also provides clear support for positions/opinions taken (includes references to the text). It must be at least 100 words.

Good. A comment that begins to integrate content but stops short of making a new contribution will earn 1 point.

Unacceptable. A comment that just agrees, disagrees, or superficially restates a peer's forum post will earn 0 points.

Final Essay

Organizational structure. This constitutes 20% of the assignment's final grade. This includes grammar, clarity, and citation forms. To earn an A in this category, a paper would have no

grammatical errors, would be formed of clearly written sentences that build strong paragraphs with clear topic sentences, and would follow the Turabian footnote citation form. A “B” paper would be relatively free of grammatical errors, would be composed of sentences that were either convoluted or overly simplistic, and would contain footnote references with errors in citation form. A “C” paper would contain multiple grammatical errors and or misspellings (such that reflected a failure to proofread) and would not use proper citation form. A “D” paper would be occasionally difficult to understand as a result of grammatical errors, and an “F” paper would be difficult to understand throughout.

Sources. This constitutes 40% of the assignment’s final grade. This includes the way you mobilize either primary or secondary sources to support your argument. To earn an A you would engage a range of source material to support an original argument. A “B” would review the relevant sources, but would not rise to the level of using them to produce a new argument. A “C” would incompletely reference relevant sources without engaging them. A “D” would fail to reference relevant sources, an “F” paper would present sources as though they were the author’s original ideas, which is plagiarism and will be dealt with through NYUAD’s academic integrity process.

Argument and perspective. This constitutes 40% of the assignment’s final grade. This is a slightly harder rubric to articulate, but it is quite important. The key to taking up historical arguments in writing is to understand and articulate the interpretive process. This means that you must be able to recognize the ways in which historical evidence has been (or is being) interpreted. An “A” paper would do this clearly and cogently, and would convey a fluent understanding of the difference between argument and evidence. A “B” paper would reflect a clear understanding of important historical events while failing to understand the range of interpretations that have been applied to them. A “C” paper would mistake the two categories, presenting interpretations as events and visa-versa. A “D” paper would present evidence and interpretation as one and the same thing, and an “F” paper would disregard the categories altogether.

Final Grades

Participation/Forum Posts 30%

Final Essay 20%

Midterm and final exams 20%

Response Papers 30%

Introductions and Defining Terms

Key Question--how does the Black Atlantic function as history and as a way of structuring contemporary meaning?

Thursday September 3rd—situating us in time and space.

- Before class meets watch two lectures on our brightspace site under media. “Introductions” and “What is the black atlantic?”
- Recitation Assignment—read Redmond, “Diaspora.” [brightspace resources page] Highlight a definition or insight that you find provocative. Write a definition of your own. Come to recitation prepared to share your definition and to discuss the following questions: how does this text help you to define the Black Atlantic? What do you anticipate that you will learn this semester? What would you like to understand by the end of the semester?

History And The Start Of The Black Atlantic

Key Question--What Are The Origins Of The Atlantic Slave Trade?

Tuesday Sept 7th Making Human Commodities

Readings:

- David Wheat, *Atlantic Africans*, Chap 1-2, “Rivers Of Guinea” And “Kingdoms Of Angola,” in, 20-103. Available As An Ebook On Jstor.

Assignment

- Watch The [3d Animation Of The Slave Ship Aurore](#). In your small group forums, share your responses to the video, and comment on those of your peers. Please see the rubric above for guidance about forum posts.

Thursday September 9th The Middle Passage

Readings

- Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage From Africa To American Diaspora* (Harvard, 2007), Chap 2, “Turning African Captives Into Atlantic Commodities,” Pp. 33-64. Available As An Ebook On Bobst, Proquest Literature Online <https://Ebookcentral.Proquest.Com/Lib/Nyulibrary-Ebooks/Detail.Action?Docid=3300396>

Culture and Economies

Key Question—What Does Slavery “Make”?

September 14th Crops [Today during classtime we will connect with our cohorts in London and Accra]

Readings

- Judith Carney, “This Was “Woman’s Wuck,” Chap 4 In *Black Rice: The African Origins Of Rice Cultivation In The Americas* (Harvard, 2001) Available As An Ebook On Bobst <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.09263>

Forum/Recitation Assignment

- Primary Source Reading: “Documents Relating To Slavery And Silk Culture. 1769”
Read Folios 163 And 164. Spend some time independently transcribing it so that you are able to fully understand the text. Use your group forum to decide, collectively, what the most important questions are that relate to the text.

September 16th Identities

Readings

- Alexander X. Byrd, "Eboe, Country, Nation, And Gustavus Vassa's Interesting Narrative," *The William And Mary Quarterly* January 2006 [J-Stor]

A Pause for Theories of Reverberations and Resistance

Key Question—What are the Afterlives of Slavery?

Sept 21st The Afterlives of slavery

Readings

- Christina Sharpe, *In The Wake*, Chap 1 “The Wake,” 1-24; And Chap2 “The Hold,” 25-68. Available as an ebook on Bobst <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/lib/nyulibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4717126>

Sept 24 Slavery and ways of knowing

Readings

- Katherine Mckittrick, “Mathematics Black Life,” *The Black Scholar* (2014), [Brightspace, Resources]

Freedom's Taken And The Notion of Freedom

Key Question—What Is The Relationship Between Slavery And Freedom?

September 28th The Haitian Revolution

Readings

- Julius Scott, *Common Wind: Afro-American Currents In The Age Of The Haitian Revolution*, Chapters 1 And 2. Available as an ebook on Bobst
http://proxy.library.nyu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1708263&site=ehost-live&ebv=EK&ppid=Page_-1

Group Assignment

- Read The Haitian Constitution, 1805. [Brightspace, resources] Using the Forum, think collectively about what this constitution tells you about the ways in which Haitian leaders were conceptualizing freedom at the start of the 19th century. What part of their definition was rooted in the experience of enslavement? What part has other roots?

September 30th Revolutionary Circuits In The Black Atlantic.

Readings

- Julius Scott, *Common Wind: Afro-American Currents In The Age Of The Haitian Revolution*, Chapters 3 And 4. Available as an ebook on Bobst
http://proxy.library.nyu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1708263&site=ehost-live&ebv=EK&ppid=Page_-1

The “ends” of Slavery

Key Question: Who ends slavery and why?

October 5th British Emancipation, The American Civil War and Beyond

Readings

- Review your readings thus far in preparation for Thursday’s midterm

Assignment

- Read Frederick Douglass, “[What To The Slave Is The Fourth Of July?](#)” In Forums Post Your Assessment Of Which (If Any) Of Douglass’s Words Resonate Today—Either To You, Or To Some Contemporary Constituency.

Oct 7th **Mid Term Exam**

[Oct 11th Fall Break, Oct 12th Monday Schedule]

A Pivot to Africa, Modern Colonialism, And Race At The Start Of The 20th Century

Key Question: Does The End Of The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Signal New Relationships Between Europe, The Americas, And Africa?

Oct 14th Political Reverberations And Scrambles For Africa

Readings

- [The Treaty Of Berlin \(1885\)](#)
- [George Washington Williams' Open Letter To King Leopold On The Congo \(1890\)](#)

Pan Africanism and 20th century Connections Across the Atlantic

Key Question-- What Is The Relationship Between An African Past And The Notion Of A Collective Present?

Oct 19th Pan Africanism

Readings

- Address to the Nations of the World by the Pan-African Conference in London, 1899. A letter drafted by W. E. B. Du bois for the first pan-African conference organized by the Trinidadian barrister Henry Sylvester Williams held in London from 23 to 25 July 1900. [Brightspace]

October 21st And other Refusals, Resisting European and American incursions

Readings

- Cedric Robinson, **Black Marxism**, chap 7 “the Nature of the Black Radical Tradition,” 167-172; and Chapter 12 “An Ending,” 307-318. [Available as a ebook through Bobst on Jstor]

Preserving Cultures

Key Question: Can cultural displays be objective or neutral? Is that even the right question?

Oct 26th Displays and Objectifications

- Assignment Read the New York Times Articles On Ota Benga in order of publication date [Brightspace] Using the discussion forums discuss the relationship between African Americans (pastors or members of the public) and the spectacle of Ota Benga's display.
- Ana Fota, [“What's Wrong with this Diorama? You Can Read All About it,” New York Times](#), 3/20/2019

Oct 28th Reckoning With The Past

Readings

- Mears and Modest, “Museums, African Collections, and Social Justice” Brightspace:
- Salamisha Tillet, “Free Is And Free Ain’t,” [https://www.Publicbooks.Org/Marcus-Tribute-2020-Free-Is-And-Free-Aint/?Utm_Source=Public+Books+Newsletter&Utm_Campaign=A06b3693a5-Email_Campaign_2020_08_28&Utm_Medium=Email&Utm_Term=0_D048c39403-A06b3693a5-47237053](https://www.publicbooks.org/marcus-tribute-2020-free-is-and-free-aint/?utm_source=Public+Books+Newsletter&utm_campaign=A06b3693a5-Email_Campaign_2020_08_28&utm_medium=Email&utm_term=0_D048c39403-A06b3693a5-47237053)

Black Modernities/Africa As Catalyst

Key Questions—How Do Freedom Movements Criss-Cross The Atlantic In The 20th Century?

Nov 2nd

Readings

- Madley, “From Africa To Auschwitz: How German South West Africa Incubated Ideas And Methods Adopted And Developed By The Nazis In Eastern Europe,” *European History Quarterly*, 35 (2005): 429-464 [Jstor]

Nov 4th Pan-Africanism And American Freedom Movements

Readings

- Listen To “Reckon With The Past To Decolonize The Future” [15m Radio Story]
- Ali Mazrui, On The Concept Of “We Are All Africans,” *The American Political Science Review*, 57, (1963), Pp. 88-97. [Jstor]
- Read The Interactive Article From The Nytimes: 1960; The Year Of Africa. [https://www.Nytimes.Com/Interactive/2020/02/06/World/Africa/Africa-Independence-Year.Html](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/02/06/world/africa/africa-independence-year.html)

Assignments.

- In the forum post, consider the challenges involved in the phrase “Decolonizing The Mind.”

Commerce, Confinement, and Coalitions In The Late -20th Through 21st Centuries

Key Question--What Is Racial Capitalism In The Contemporary Moment?

Nov 9th

- Watch—Stephanie Black. *Life And Debt*, (New York: New Yorker Video, 2003) this video is available through our class reserve site on Bobst.

Assignment

- Read prime minister Michael Manley's address to the members of the United Nations special committee against apartheid held in Kingston, Jamaica, in May 1979, pp16-31. In group forums, discuss the language of political alignment that Manley mobilizes and consider its connection to his fight with the IMF and the World Bank.

Nov 11th The Politics Of Coalition

Readings:

- Cristina Sharpe, *In The Wake*, Chapter 3, "The Hold," 68-101 and Chapter 4 "The Weather," 102-34. Available as an ebook at Bobst <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/lib/nyulibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4717126>

Navigating Consumption In The 21st Century

Nov 16th: Consuming Pleasures—Cell Phones

Readings

- Dena Montague, "Stolen Goods: Coltan And Conflict In The Democratic Republic Of Congo," *Sais Review*, 22 (Winter-Spring 2002): 103-118 [Project Muse]

Nov 18th Consuming Pleasures--Strutting

Readings

- Ebony Magazine, 1963. [Brightspace]
- Tariq Zaidi, "The Sapeurs Of Brazzaville," *Lensculture Magazine*. <https://www.lensculture.com/articles/tariq-zaidi-the-sapeurs-of-brazzaville> And Watch Solange, "Losing You" <http://www.thefader.com/2012/10/02/video-solange-losing-you/>
- Connie Wang, "Finding The Beauty In Cultural Appropriation," *Nytimes*, 20 April 2019 <https://nyti.ms/2krwbnu>

Nov 23rd Class Cancelled, Be Thankful! [Nov 25th And 26th Thanksgiving Break]

During this week, please review or complete your reading of Cristina Sharpe, in the wake and use the forum groups to discuss the over-arching intervention of the text. We will engage Sharpe again in the coming week. Because we aren't meeting this week, please compose more substantive forum posts and responses to your classmates' posts.

Reparations And Redress And Memorials

Key Question--What Debts Are Owed?

Nov 30th Reparations

Reading

- Ta-Nehisi Coates, [The Case For Reparations](#).
- Matthew Desmond, [Capitalism is Brutal](#)

Assignments

- In Small Group Forums Discuss “The Black Manifesto”, 1969.

Dec 2nd Remembering And Memorializing

Readings:

- Lisa Richardson, “[I Am A Black Daughter Of The Confederacy](#),” LA Times, August 14th, 2017.
- Roger Cohen, “[Confederate Statues And American Memory](#),” New York Times, Sept 6, 2017
- Bree Newsome, “[Go Ahead, Topple The Monuments To The Confederacy, All Of Them](#),” Washington Post, August 18, 2017.
- Caroline Williams, “[You want a Confederate Monument?](#),” New York Times, June 26, 2020

Defining Home

Key Question--How Do We Tell This Story? What Is The Importance Of Critical Language When Describing Historical Phenomenon?

Dec 8th The Complicated Notion Of Home

Readings

- Saidiya Hartman, The Time Of Slavery, *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101.4 1(2002) 757-777
[Http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/south_atlantic_quarterly/v101/101.4hartman.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/south_atlantic_quarterly/v101/101.4hartman.html)
- Walter Johnson, To Remake the World Again
<https://bostonreview.net/forum/walter-johnson-to-remake-the-world>

Assignment:

- Using group forums, discuss Johnson’s six virtues of an account of justice rooted in the histories of slavery.

Dec 10th Worldmaking After Covid

Readings

- Excerpts From *The Politics Of Care: From Covid To Black Lives Matter* (Boston Review, 2020)

Wrapping up

Dec 14th Last Day of The Semester

- Critical Essay Due--Why Memorialize?

Final Exam Dec 16th 10am-11:50am