African American Folklore

Spring 2026 | Africana Studies 3230 / English 3158 | George P. Cunningham

These purist look on such ceremonies as grammarians look at a dialect, as cities look on provinces and empires on their colonies. Memory that yearns to join the center, a limb remembering the body from which it has been severed, like those bamboo thighs of the god. In other words, the way that the Caribbean is sill looked at, illegitimate, rootless, mongrelized. "No people there," to quote Froude, "in the true sense of the word." No people. Fragments and echoes of real people, unoriginal and broken.

Derek Walcott
"the nobel lecture"

Negro folklore, evolving within a larger culture which regarded it as inferior, was an especially courageous expression. It announced the Negro's willingness to trust his own experience, his own sensibilities as to the definition of reality, rather than allow his masters to define these crucial matters for him ..... And we recognized and were proud of our group's own style wherever we discerned it. – in jazzmen and prize fighters, ballplayers and tap dancers; in gesture, inflection, intonation, timbre and phrasing. Indeed, in all those nuances of expression and attitude which reveal a culture.

Ralph Ellison
Shadow and Act

Course Goals: This course focuses on the relationship between the African American oral tradition and black consciousness in the United States. It is designed 1) to introduce the basic genres of the African American oral tradition; 2) to introduce some terms and concepts drawn from folklore, anthropology, literary criticism, and other disciplines that are useful in thinking about those genres; and 3) to present one possible interpretation of the African American oral tradition.

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Required Texts

Lawrence W. Levine. Black Culture Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom

Roberts, John W. From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom

additional readings on Blackboard

Course Requirements:

mid-term essay examination	(40%)
final essay examination	(45%)
attendance/participation	(15%)

Africana Studies 3230
English 3158

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Course Outline

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.

clifford geertz

part I: introduction

culture and consciousness: subjects for discussion -- usage *vs.* definitions, definition of folklore; anthropological views of culture; the organization of experience, metaphor; high culture, popular culture, and folk culture; development of the concept of folklore; folklore and nationalism.

Raymond Williams, "Culture" and "Folk" (Blackboard)
Gene Bluestein, "Folklore and Ideology" (Blackboard)

A classical anthropological definition of culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a man as a members of society." A more modern definition refers to the "organization of experience" shared by member of a community, including "their standards for perceiving, predicting, judging, and acting." This means that culture includes all socially standardized ways of seeing and thinking about the world; of understanding relationships among people, things, and events; of establishing preferences and purposes; of carrying out actions and pursuing goals. In a general sense, then, culture consists of the rules which generate and guide behavior. More specifically, the culture of a particular people or other social body is everything that one must learn to behave in ways that are recognizable, predictable, and understandable to those people."

the example of language: subjects for discussion -- usage *vs.* definitions, metaphor, folksay, semantics, proverbs, worldview, deep structure/ surface expression.

Geneva Smitherman, "Black Semantics: Words and Concepts in Black English, Past and Present" and "How I Got Ovuh': African Worldview and Afro-American Oral Tradition" from Talking and Testifying (Blackboard)

part ii: african-american culture in slavery

africans and "the new world": subjects for discussion -- the context of African culture, assimilation, syncretism, acculturation, amalgamation, and African survivals.

Levine, "The Contours of Slave Songs" and "A Question of Origins" (pp. 1-30)
Roger Bastide, "Syncretism and Amalgamation Between Religions" and "Three Kinds of Folklore" (Blackboard)

the moral order of the universe 1 -- faith and deliverance: subjects for discussion -- spirituals, covenants, sacred time and space, ring shouts, ritual, religion and the world view of the slaves, other worldly *vs.* this worldly, the promise of the Old Testament, and the moral topography of the Holy Land.

> . . . for people in traditional societies religion is a means of extending the world spatially upward so that communication with the other world becomes ritually possible, and extending it temporally backward so that paradigmatic acts of the gods and mythical ancestors can be continually re-enacted and indefinitely recoverable. By creating sacred time and space, man can perpetually live in the presence of his god, can hold on to the certainty that within on's own lifetime "rebirth" is continually possible, and can impose order on the chaos of the universe.
>
> Lawrence Levine

Levine, "The Quest for Certainty: Slave Spirituals" (pp. 30-55)
Roberts, "Christian Soldiers All: Spirituals as Heroic Expression" (pp. 109-170)
The Classic Spirituals(Blackboard)
T.W. Higginson, "Slave Spirituals" (Blackboard)

realms of power and knowledge: subjects for discussion -- superstition, folk medicine, signs, divination, conjure, and voodoo/vodun.

Levine, "The Quest for Control: Slave Folk Beliefs" (pp. 55-80)
Roberts, "The Power Within: The Conjurer as Folk Hero" (pp. 65-108**)**

the ethics of day-to-day life 1 -- the trickster: subjects for discussion -- folktales, narratives and knowledge, the trickster figure, liminality, transgression, indeterminacy, the trickster as slave hero, Brer Rabbit, and John.

> " . . . narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting . . . , stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation. Moreover, under these almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different, even opposing, cultural backgrounds. Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself."
>
> Roland Barthe

Levine, "The Meaning of the Slave Tales" (pp. 81-135)
Roberts, "Br'er Rabbit and John: Trickster Heroes in Slavery" (pp. 17-64)
selected folktales (Blackboard)

part iii: from slavery to freedom

the new context of freedom: subjects for discussion -- Jubilee songs, Afro-American culture and upward mobility, literacy and orality, folk culture, liminality, self-consciousness, individualism, and marginality.

Levine, "The Language of Freedom" and "The Fate of the Sacred World" (pp. 136-174)

the moral order of the universe 2 -- the transformation of the sacred world view: subjects for discussion -- urbanization, the rise of commercial culture, gospel songs, women and gospel music, the promise of the New Testament.

Levine, "The Development of Gospel Music" (pp. 174-189)
Film: *SAY AMEN, SOMEBODY*

the ethics of day-to-day life 2 -- the rise of secular music: subjects for discussion -- work songs, blues AAB pattern, emergence of individualism, the blues ethos, women and the blues.

Levine, "The Rise of Secular Music," (pp. 190-297)
Hazel Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime:" The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues (Blackboard)
selected blues (Blackboard)

part iv: black culture in the twentieth century

verbal arts: subjects for discussion -- toasts, boasts, individualism, the primacy of style, the art of existence.

Levine, "Black Laughter" (pp. 298-366)
William H. Higgins, "I Am the Greatest: the Folklore of Muhammad Ali" (Blackboard)

> "What I mean by the phrase [art of existence] are those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria.
>
> michel foucault

black heroes: subjects for discussion -- John Henry, Joe Louis, heroes as combatants against racism

Levine, "The Slave as Hero," "The Modernization of the Black Hero," and "The Hero *vs*. Society: John Henry to Joe Louis" (pp. 386-407, 420-440)

black anti-heroes: subjects for discussion -- social bandits, toasts, the modern trickster, John Hardy, Railroad Bill, Stagolee, Pimping Sam, Signifying Monkey.

Levine, "The Fate of the Trickster," and "Bad Men and Bandits" (pp. 370-386, 407-420)
Roberts, "'You Done Me Wrong': The Badman as Outlaw Hero" (pp. 171-220)
selected toasts (Blackboard)

Learning Objectives:

1. Students will be able to identify and discuss the principal genres of the African American oral tradition.
2. Students will be able to identify and discuss key concepts of cultural and literary criticism and apply those concepts to the African American oral traditions.
3. Students will be able to discuss in an extended essay.

Department Student Learning Outcomes:

By the end of the course students will be able to:

1. Recognize and explain the vernacular, popular, and creative arts as sites of self-definition, engagement with other cultural traditions, self-invention and resistance.
2. Demonstrate critical thinking and analytical skills through comparative and interdisciplinary inquiry and thought, as well as interrogate the ideological, methodological, cultural, and social ways of looking the regions of the African Diaspora and its members.
3. Utilize academic writing to demonstrate facility in disciplinary and interdisciplinary methods of research, independent thought, and critical analyses.

Additional Academic Information

University's Policy on Academic Integrity: The faculty and administration of Brooklyn College support an environment free from cheating and plagiarism. Each student is responsible for being aware of what constitutes cheating and plagiarism and for avoiding both. The complete text of the CUNY Academic Integrity Policy and the Brooklyn College procedure for implementing that policy can be found at this site: http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/bc/policies. If a faculty member suspects a violation of academic integrity and, upon investigation, confirms that violation, or if the student admits the violation, the faculty member MUST report the violation.

Center for Disability Services: In order to receive disability-related academic accommodations students must first be registered with the Center for Student Disability Services. Students who have a documented disability or suspect they may have a disability are invited to set up an appointment with the Director of the Center for Student Disability Services, Ms. Valerie Stewart-Lovell at 718-951-5538. If you have already registered with the Center for Student Disability Services please provide your professor with the course accommodation form and discuss you specific accommodation with him/her.

Nonattendance because of religious beliefs: Students who are unable to attend classes on a particular day or days because of religious beliefs will be excused from any examination or study or work requirements. Faculty must make good-faith efforts to provide students absent from class because of religious beliefs equivalent opportunities to make up the work missed; no additional fees may be charged for this consideration.

Student Bereavement Policy: Students who experience the death of a loved one must contact the Division of Student Affairs, 2113 Boylan Hall, if they wish to implement either the Standard Bereavement Procedure or the Leave of Absence Bereavement Procedure. The Division of Student Affairs has the right to request a document that verifies the death (e.g., a funeral program or death notice).