

**LTEN 187//ETHN 176//MUS 154**  
**Black Music/Black Texts: Communication and Cultural Expression**  
**Professor Fatima El-Tayeb**  
**Spring quarter 2007**

Class: T/Th 3:30–4:50, WLH 2205  
Course website: <http://webct.ucsd.edu>  
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**Overview:**

Modern Western discourse is structured around interrelated, hierarchal binaries; mind/body, male/female, subject/object, word/sound, culture/nature, white/black; in which one appears as norm, the other as aberration. Black people have traditionally been assigned the deviant, lesser position in these equations (body, female, sound, nature etc.), classifying them as less than human. In this class we will explore some of the ways in which black music has been a site of resistance against interlocking forms of race, class, gender, and sexual oppression, aimed at deconstructing the binary system itself.

**Aims and Objectives:**

In this course we will explore the role of black music as a tool for social change and site of intellectual discourse, in short, the ways in which the meaning of black identity is negotiated through music. It is by now largely undisputed within science that “race” is a social rather than a biological reality. But while they lost their grounding in nature, racial categories have not necessarily become less relevant, though they did become more complicated. If “black identity” is not reducible to phenotypical markers, then how can it be defined, who is black and how does blackness look like? Does it even make sense to speak of “black” or “white” or should we all be colorblind?

Some of the most interesting answers to these questions have come from black intellectuals such as Paul Gilroy and Michelle Wright who argue that what “black people” share is a particular culture or discourse. I.e. blackness as a category gains meaning as a term that references a shared experience (being perceived as “black” means you are treated in a certain way and are associated with a specific history, i.e. the identity marker “black” has certain, predictable consequences), but, importantly, goes beyond the mere experience: black identity is also shaped by the reactions to the ascription of the marker “black,” by the ways in which black people make sense of their experiences, resist others defining them and argue about the meaning of “blackness”.

According to this argument, black culture is inseparable from the economic and social conditions under which black people live, but at the same time is not reducible to them. It is this creative space between experience and its representation that we will primarily explore in this class. The particular relevance of the African diaspora's intellectual contributions to modernity as well as the means for its suppression lie in its violation of established binary notions of culture and politics, high art and mass entertainment, philosophical discourse and activism. Popular music thus is as relevant to this discourse as are political activism or philosophical debates, while at the same music is considered less serious, important etc. as the latter forms, leading to a marginalization of black peoples intellectual contributions to modernity. We will trace these contribution by focusing on four interrelated fields:

1. **Transnationalism**, i.e. the idea that black culture always crossed national boundaries, relating black people across the world or more specifically around the “Black Atlantic”. Paul Gilroy's seminal text of the same title will be at the center of the first section. Gilroy puts forward a twofold argument, claiming that black people have been centrally rather than marginally involved in modern Western history and arguing that music was the main means through which African diaspora population around the Atlantic created a (partially) common culture. The problem, Gilroy concludes lies not with black people and their lack of cultural contributions, but with Western, nation-focused scholarship which ignores these contributions. We will test this claim by looking at the example of the Haitian revolution, its contemporary and current perception and the ways in which it ultimately affected African American music originating in New Orleans.
2. **Incarceration**. Freedom is a the central theme of African American music. A theme that easily can be tied to what Gilroy and others define as the key experience of the African diaspora in the West: the transatlantic slave trade and the reduction of “black” human beings to “commodities.” While slavery ended officially with the emancipation proclamation in 1963, it did not result in freedom. /black peoples

freedom of movement was limited in innumerable ways, access to education, housing, jobs remained severely restricted. But freedom was and is withheld from African Americans in much more literal ways: African American men make up almost half of the nation's prison population, while African American women represent the fastest growing group. The prison industry in turn is a growing and profitable business: no nation in the West incarcerates a larger portion of its population than the United States and California is leading within the U.S. We will briefly trace the history of incarceration after the end of slavery, the use of chain gangs in the South (still practiced in Georgia!) and the emergence of change gang songs, popularized by early 20<sup>th</sup> Ct. blues artists such as Lead Belly and then take a closer look at the relationship between Gangsta rap and the "prison-industrial complex" in (Southern) California.

3. **Gender and Sexuality.** Discussions on the decline of Hip Hop culture routinely focus on its reduction to bootie and bling bling, supporting the claim that popular culture is as oppressive as it is liberating. While we will touch the reasons and effects of the commercialization and domestication of Hip Hop, we will focus on the presence of counter models of gender and sexuality always present in black music (though often invisible in its mainstream reception). Our two examples will be women's agency in early 20<sup>th</sup> Ct. blues and the contemporary HomoHop movement.
4. **Technology and Futurism.** Music has always been a means for black people to envision a better future and Paul Gilroy among others sees the decline of contemporary black music expressed in its failure to produce utopian visions, instead succumbing to the values of capitalism. Other authors and artists however have a more ambiguous position to black music's visionary potential. Kodwo Eshun for example rejects "naïve" utopias in favor of a futurism that embraces technology and cyborg identities without dreaming of salvation. We will trace the tension between the two models of black music's relation to imagined futures by looking at "Afro-Futurism," as expressed in the music of Sun Ra, George Clinton, and arguable Public Enemy. These artists used innovative technologies, reminding us that sonic technological progress has often been pioneered by black artists, a realization that challenges common assumptions about a "digital divide" that sees black people (and women) as largely marginal to cutting-edge technologies.

The persistent exclusion of African diaspora populations from histories of technological progress also points to a perception of blacks as always marginal to innovation, producing culture that is ultimately always both derivative, a fusion of elements "already there," and raw, providing the clay to others' art. A similar argument could be made regarding the (non)perception of black intellectual traditions in representations of (post)modernity. The texts explored in this course suggest instead that black people in the West constituted in many ways the first "modern" population, confronted with conditions of displacement and questions of identity that became relevant on a much larger scale in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

#### **Required Texts:**

- All required texts will be available on our course website ([webct.ucsd.edu](http://webct.ucsd.edu))

#### **Course Requirements:**

- Attendance and participation (including response questions and songs) -15% of final grade
- Response papers - 20% of final grade
- Presentation - 25% of final grade
- Mid term - 20% of final grade
- Final Paper - 20% of final grade

#### **Course Policies**

- Attendance will be taken at every class meeting
- You are expected to arrive to class on time and well-prepared
- Late arrival to class constitutes ½ absence
- Students are allowed two unexcused absences without penalty. More than two absences without appropriate documentation will lower your final course grade by 3 points
- Readings are to be completed in full for the first day assigned
- Papers and assignments are due at the beginning of class unless otherwise indicated. Late papers will lose a full letter grade (or 10 points) if they are handed in after class and an additional letter grade for each day they are late. Assignments will not be accepted more than three days after the due date and an F will be given for that assignment.
- If you have a documented disability and wish to discuss academic accommodations, contact me as soon as possible.

- Your work must properly document all sources and any ideas which are not wholly your own. Incidents of plagiarism will not be tolerated and will result in failure of the course.
- You are required to use your UCSD email account and regularly check the course website, where you will find the syllabus, the required texts, and background information on the weekly readings (updated throughout the quarter).
- All information about assignment content and due dates, requirements etc. are to be found on the course website. If you have relevant questions not covered by this information, post your question on the website in the Discussion section and I will answer it as soon as possible.

### **Participation**

You are required to discuss the reading material in class and to be prepared to pose a number of questions for each text. Your formal and informal responses to these readings will serve as the basis of an informed and lively class discussion. Without your active participation, there will be no course, so be prepared to come to the seminar as a vital member of an intellectual community. The issues raised in this class are by no means resolved. It is thus expected that as a class we will occasionally disagree and not necessarily come to a consensus about the material. This should be seen as positive, rather than negative.

### **Response Questions and Song Choice**

You will devise a series of questions (2 or 3) for one of each week's main readings, to be emailed to me by 10:00 pm the day before class. These questions should demonstrate your own engagement with and analysis of course materials. Focus on whatever strikes you as particularly important/difficult/ surprising about the text in question.

Some of the texts are rather challenging, so do not be frustrated if you do not immediately understand everything. My advice with a reading that you find especially difficult is to read it all the way through once, without stopping to figure things out, look up words, etc. Then, read it through again, slowly, picking out one line of argument and following it all the way through the article. Don't try to gain a 'comprehensive' knowledge of the text, just try to gain a sense of one important line of argument, and the ways that it relates to other texts and questions we are addressing in the class. Your response papers are a good site for engaging in this sort of critical work. Use the discussion sections to present your understanding of an argument but also to raise questions you have about the text.

You will also think of one or two songs reflecting each of the courses four themes (see above). Send the song itself and/or its lyrics and a short paragraph explaining your choice by 10:00 pm the day before class.

Both your questions and song choices will be posted on our website.

### **Response Papers**

You will write two response papers, allowing you to address one of the response questions in more detail by attempting a structured written response. Papers should be 2-3 pages, typed and double-spaced (based on 300 words per page) and are due at the beginning of the *next* session.

### **Mid term**

The midterm will be a take-home exam based on questions covered in class up to that point. The exam will be handed out Thursday, May 3, and is due Tuesday, May 8, 11 a.m. (drop the paper of in my mailbox in the Literature Department or email it though webct (it is your responsibility to make sure that the email was sent successfully) .

### **Group Presentation**

Your group presentation will be based on that session's readings and can take three forms:

#### **1. The text in question will be your main focus**

In the first presentation you will collectively devise a series of questions that guide class discussion of a particular reading regarding its relation to other readings, the way it illuminates issues discussed in class, introduces a new aspect etc. (along the lines of the weekly response questions) The questions must be emailed to me/posted online 6:00 pm the day *preceding* the discussion. Group members are expected to facilitate the discussion and to provide prompts and or background to the questions as necessary. You should have an idea of how you would answer such questions and where you wish to lead the class with these questions. You might decide to present a close-reading of a particular textual passage or scene, or relate the text thematically or stylistically to readings covered in previous weeks. You should have at least as many questions as members of your group and quite likely more, as you will want to be able to lead the class for the entire period. Creativity that

advances our collective intellectual inquiry is encouraged. Outside research is expected.

Issues you might want to address in your response include the following: Whose perspective does the text present? On what evidence does the author base his/her claims? What methodology is used? What theoretical concepts are central to the text? How well does the author address issues of race, gender, class, and sexualities? Does their theoretical argument fall apart when applied to everyday life, and if so, how? What is the author's methodological framework? Is the cultural and historical context effectively mapped out? What current events, images, films, musical texts, material artifacts etc., act as interesting textual examples relevant to the text's arguments?

### 2. The presentation will use a particular aspect of the text as a starting point

Such a presentation would e.g. focus on a particular artist/movement especially relevant to the topic..The class will have read the text that provides basic information and your presentation is meant to illustrate the artist's/group's approach and strategy as well as your own assessment of it. Outside critical research on your chosen topic is expected. The presentation is a forum for your exploration and extension of the ideas of the seminar. Creativity is encouraged and you are more than welcome to include various media in your presentation.

### 3. Both of the above

On the day of the presentation submit an outline that includes your main points, discussion questions and recommended readings. I am happy to meet with each group prior to and after the presentation.

### **Final Paper:**

The final paper will be a written version of your class presentation, either presenting your overall ideas in a more formal context or elaborating one particular aspect. The essays are due on our final exam day, June 14, 3:00 pm, and should be 5-6 pages, typed and double-spaced (based on 300 words per page).

### **Grades**

The grades your work will earn are an indication of my assessment of your understanding of and facility with course materials. You will receive letter grades that translate to gpa in the following manner:

A	4.0	B-	2.7	C-/D+	1.5
A-	3.7	B-/C+	2.5	D+	1.3
A-/B+	3.5	C+	2.3	D	1.0
B+	3.3	C	2.0	F	0.0
B	3.0	C-	1.7		

### **WEEK 1**

#### **Introduction: Black is, black ain't**

It is by now largely undisputed within science that "race" is a social rather than a biological reality. But while they lost their grounding in nature, racial categories have not necessarily become less relevant, though they did become more complicated. If "black identity" is not reducible to phenotypical markers, then how can it be defined, who is black and how does blackness look like? Does it even make sense to speak of "black" or "white" or should we all be colorblind? What is "black identity", how and by whom is it defined? Which role does music play in this process? What is the role of black music in U.S. Society (and in the global market), how does this relate to the position of African Americans?

#### **Tu 4-3**

Overview and introduction

#### **TH 4-5**

(Post)Blackness

Harry Elam, "Change Clothes and Go. A Postscript to Postblackness"

### **WEEK 2**

#### **Music as transnational discourse: From the Haiti Revolution to New Orleans Jazz**

The idea that black culture always crossed national boundaries relating black people across the world or more specifically around the "Black Atlantic". Paul Gilroy's seminal text of the same title will be at the center of the first section. Gilroy puts forward a twofold argument, claiming that black people have been centrally rather than marginally involved in modern Western history and arguing that music was the main means through which African diaspora population around the Atlantic created a (partially) common culture. The problem, Gilroy

concludes lies notwithstanding black people and their lack of cultural contributions, but with Western, nation-focused scholarship which ignores these contributions. We will test this claim by looking at the example of the Haitian revolution, its contemporary and current perception and the ways in which it ultimately affected African American music originating in New Orleans.

#### **Tu 4-10**

##### *Black Culture and the modern West*

Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, excerpts from Chpts 1 & 3

#### **Th 4-12**

##### *Example: Respresentations of Haiti*

Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Silencing the Past"

### **WEEK 3**

#### **Tu 4-17**

##### *Example: New Orleans as a transnational space: Jazz to Katrina*

Overview History of New Orleans

Court Carney, "New Orleans and the Creation of Early Jazz"

### **Incarceration. From Chain Gang Songs to Gangsta Rap**

Freedom is a, if not the central theme of African American music. A theme that easily can be tied to what Gilroy and others define as the key experience of the African diaspora in the West: the transatlantic slave trade and the reduction of "black" human beings to "commodities." While slavery ended officially with the emancipation proclamation in 1863, it did not result in freedom. /black peoples freedom of movement was limited in innumerable ways, access to education, housing, jobs remained severely restricted. But freedom was and is withheld from African Americans in much more literal ways: African American men comprise the largest group among the nations prison population, while African American women represent the fastest growing group. The prison industry in turn is a growing and profitable business: no nation in the West incarcerates a larger portion of its population than the United States and California is leading ...We will briefly trace the history of incarceration after the end of slavery, the use of chain gangs in the South (still practiced in Georgia!) and the emergence of change gang songs, popularized by early 20<sup>th</sup> Ct. blues artists such as Leadbelly and then take a closer look at the relationship between Gangsta rap and the "prison-industrial complex" in (Southern) California

#### **Th 4-19**

##### *Plantation to Prison: Post-Civil War Penal Codes*

Excerpt from: Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

Carl Engel on Leadbelly, *The Musical Quarterly* 1937

"Florida Reintroduces Chain Gang," *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 109, No. 4. (Feb., 1996), pp. 876-881.

### **WEEK 4**

#### **Tu 4-24**

##### *Prisons and Black Resistance*

Robin Kelley, "The Riddle of the Zoot" - **Presentation 1**

Film: Excerpt from: *All Power to the People*

#### **Th 4-26**

##### *African Americans and the Prison Crisis*

Houston A. Baker, "The Black Urban Beat: Rap and the Law" - **Presentation 2**

James Paterson, "'Dead Presence.' Money and Mortal Themes in Hip Hop Culture"

### **WEEK 5**

#### **Tu 5-1**

##### *Gangsta Rap and the 'Prison-Industrial Complex'*

Robin Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, kickin' Ballistics. Gangsta Rap and 'Postindustrial' Los Angeles"

#### **- Presentation 3**

#### **Th 5-3**

### **Gender and Sexuality. Blues women to Queer Hip Hop**

Discussions on the decline of Hip Hop culture routinely focus on its reduction to bootie and bling bling, supporting the claim that popular culture is as oppressive as it is liberating.. While we will touch the reasons and effects of the commercialization and domestication of Hip Hop, we will focus on the presence of counter models of gender and sexuality always present in black music (though often invisible in its mainstream reception). Our two examples will be women's agency in early 20<sup>th</sup> Ct. blues and the contemporary HomoHop movement.

*The Politics of Gender: Bessie Smith*

Angela Davis, "Blame it on the Blues" - **Presentation 4**

Jackie Kaye, "Bessie Smith" - **Presentation 5**

Film: Excerpt from: *Tiny & Ruby. Hell divin' Women*

**WEEK 6**

Tu 5-8

**Th 5-10**

*Civil Rights to Black Arts Movement*

Ruth Feldstein, "I Don't Trust You Anymore": Nina Simone, Culture, and Black Activism in the 1960s"

- **Presentation 6**

**WEEK 7**

*Women in HipHop/Fear of a Queer Planet: HomoHop*

**Tu 5-15**

Lisa Jones, "pussy ain't free"

Tricia Rose, "never trust a big butt and a smile" - **Presentation 7**

Tim'm T. West, "Keepin' It Real. Disidentification and Its Discontents" – **Presentation 8**

Munoz, "'The White to Be Angry.' Vaginal Creme Davis' Terrorist Drag."

**Th 5-17**

**Technology and Futurism.**

Music has always been a means for black people to envision a better future and Paul Gilroy among others sees the decline of contemporary black music expressed in its failure to produce utopian visions, instead succumbing to the values of capitalism. Other authors and artists however have a more ambiguous position to black music's visionary potential. Kodwo Eshun for example rejects "naive" utopias in favor of a futurism that embraces technology and cyborg identities without dreaming of salvation. We will trace the tension between the two models of black music's relation to imagined futures by looking at "Afro-Futurism," as expressed in the music of Sun Ra, George Clinton, and arguable Public Enemy. These artists used innovative technologies, reminding us that sonic technologies have often been pioneered by black artists, a realization that challenges common assumptions about a "digital divide" that sees black people (and women) as largely marginal to cutting-edge technologies.

*Beginnings: The Back to Africa Movement*

Kelley, "Freedom Dreams"- Presentation 9

2/5:

**WEEK 8**

*Afrofuturism*

**Tu 5-22**

Film: The Last Angel of History

Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afro-Futurism"

**TH 5-24**

2/6: *Space is the place: Sun Ra and George Clinton*

Kodwo Eshun, "Motion Capture" // More Brilliant than the Sun - **Presentation 10**

**WEEK 9**

**Tu 5-29**

*Gimme a Break: Oral Traditions and Digital Media*

Tricia Rose, "Soul Sonic Forces" - **Presentation 11**

**TH 5-31**

*Bring the Noise: Public Enemy*

S. Craig Watkins, "The Digital Underground" - **Presentation 12**

Film: Excerpt from: *Do the Right Thing*

**WEEK 10**

**Outlook: Beyond the limits of race and nation**

**Tu 6-5**

*Afro-Asian Collaborations*

Vijay Prashad, "Kung Fusion" - **Presentation 13**

**Th 6-7**

*(Dangerous) Crossroads*

George Lipsitz, "Strategic Anti-Essentialism in Popular Music" – **Presentation 14**