

## Introduction to African-American Philosophy

John Drabinski  
jdrabinski@amherst.edu  
Johnson Chapel 301B

Tu/Th @ 1:00-2:20, Chapin 205  
Office Hours, Tu/Th @ 9:00-11:00 and by appt  
Phone - 413.542.5461

**Course books** : (available at Amherst Books): James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (Vintage); Fredrick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass* (City Lights); W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* (Bedford); Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Dark* (Harvard); Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (Dover); Cornel West, *Keeping Faith* (Routledge). Additional readings will be available through the Amherst College course page.

**Course themes** : What is distinctive about African-American experience? How does that distinctiveness bear on the theory and practice of philosophy and philosophical thinking? And how does the African-American philosophical tradition alter conventional philosophical accounts of subjectivity, knowledge, time, language, history, embodiment, memory, and justice? In this course, we will read a range of African-American thinkers from the twentieth century in order to develop an appreciation of the unique, critical philosophical voice in the black intellectual tradition. Our readings of works by Martin Delany, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Anna Julia Cooper, Alain Locke, James Baldwin, Angela Davis, Tommie Shelby, and Cornel West will open up crucial issues that transform philosophy's most central problems: knowing, being, and acting. As well, we will consider the cluster of thinkers with whom those works are critically concerned, including key texts from nineteenth century German philosophy, American pragmatism, and contemporary existentialism and postmodernism. What emerges from these texts and critical encounters is a sense of philosophy and philosophical practice as embedded in the historical experience - in all of its complexity - of African-Americans in the twentieth century.

Our course is a survey, which means we will cover a wide range of texts and time periods, beginning in the end of the nineteenth century and concluding in the late twentieth, early twenty-first century. As well, we will read from a number of thinkers with very different orientations. Some will have literary flair, some will write in a polemical tone, some will write analytical essays, most a combination of all three. Philosophy is done in many registers. At the same time, we will attempt to catch sight, across all this eclecticism, of the distinctive character of philosophizing in the African-American tradition. For reasons that we will see as we go along, autobiography, polemic, social diagnosis, political urgency, and related styles are not only aspects, but absolutely crucial, central features of the tradition. This means that we are required, as readers, to attend to multiple voices in the text in order to appreciate the full character of philosophizing in this tradition and the important reasons for certain registers and modes of inquiry.

**Course requirements** : The requirements for this course are straightforward. You are required to come to class every session, well-prepared, and ready to discuss. Active participation is expected and comprises 20% of your grade. Two essays – a midterm and a final – comprise 60% of your grade. Each essay will be on a topic of your choosing and of 8-10 pages in length. The remaining 20% of your grade will come from a collaborative glossary project (details at an appropriate time).

No more than two unexcused absences are permitted, except in cases of emergency. If such an emergency arises, please be in contact with your class Dean as well as your professor, in order to have proper documentation of your situation. Attendance is mandatory in part because the class sessions are irreplaceable (you can only learn if you hear discussion of the ideas), in part – larger, in fact – because you are smart, observant, and interesting. Your classmates deserve to hear your reflections, critiques, and exploratory inquiries.

## Reading schedule

**4 Sept** :: Hello!

**6 Sept** :: What is philosophy?

**11 Sept** :: Delany, "The Condition, Elevation, Emigration..." (r)

**13 Sept** :: Delany, "The Condition, Elevation, Emigration..." (r)

**18 Sept** :: Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*

**20 Sept** :: Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*

**25 Sept** :: Washington, *Up from Slavery*

**27 Sept** :: Washington, *Up from Slavery*

**02 Oct** :: Cooper, "Has America a Race Problem?" (r)

**04 Oct** :: Cooper, "Womanhood" (r)

**09 Oct** :: BREAK

**11 Oct** :: Du Bois, *Souls*, Chs. I-II

**16 Oct** :: Du Bois, *Souls*, Chs. III-IV

**18 Oct** :: Du Bois, *Souls*, Ch. XI

**23 Oct** :: Locke, "The Message of the Negro Poets" (r) and Locke, "The Negro Spirituals" (r)

**25 Oct** :: Locke, "The Negro in American Culture" (r) and Locke, "The Ethics of Culture" (r)

**30 Oct** :: Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

**01 Nov** :: Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

**06 Nov** :: Davis, "Lecture on Liberation I"

**08 Nov** :: Davis, "Lecture on Liberation II"

**13 Nov** :: West, "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual"

**15 Nov** :: West, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference"

**20 Nov** :: BREAK

**22 Nov** :: BREAK

**27 Nov** :: West, "Race and Social Theory"

**29 Nov** :: West, "The Paradox of the African American Rebellion"

**04 Dec** :: Shelby, *We Who Are Dark*, Intro and Ch. I,

**06 Dec** :: Shelby, *We Who Are Dark*, Chs. III & IV

**11 Dec** :: Shelby, *We Who Are Dark*, Chs. V & VI

**13 Dec** :: Shelby, *We Who Are Dark*, Conclusion