

BLST 32

Theorizing the Black Atlantic

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Books : Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (Harvard), *Against Race* (Harvard), *Post-colonial Melancholia* (Harvard), *Darker than Blue* (Harvard); Tanya Barson and Peter Gorschlüter, *Afro Modern* (Tate Liverpool); e-reserve essays by Kant, Hegel, Benjamin, Du Bois, Fanon, Bhabha, and Gates. Available at Amherst Books.

What happens to culture in the transition between Africa, Europe, and the Americas?

What new forms of subjectivity, community, and culture emerge in the Americas and elsewhere? How do these new forms help us clarify the specifically African sense of 'diaspora'? How does the experience of 'the black Atlantic' alter our understanding of history and the development of ideas? In addressing these questions, this course examines themes of hybridity, double-consciousness, Modernity, and diaspora in contemporary philosophy and cultural theory. Our attention will center on the work of Paul Gilroy, whose reflections on black Atlantic cultural formation and formations have broken new theoretical ground over the past two decades. Gilroy's work will allow us to engage theoretically with the peculiar historical dynamics of the black Atlantic, which, in turn, enables us to attend with some depth to this particular diasporic consciousness through characterizations of literature, art, philosophy, and music. Alongside Gilroy, we will read other core theoretical texts on the black Atlantic by DuBois, Fanon, Bhabha, Gates, and others. In order to establish context and some points of contrast, we will also read important texts on the philosophy of history and history of ideas by Kant, Hegel, and Benjamin. These varied reflections on the black Atlantic and the dynamics of cultural development help us understand the distinctive character of the African diaspora and its hybrid intellectual productions.

The ultimate aim of this course is to develop theoretical literacy and facility. By theoretical *literacy*, I mean the ability to formulate, compare, and elaborate the central concepts of black Atlantic theory and a general theory of history and cultural production. By theoretical *facility*, I mean the ability to deploy those concepts to do what theoretical approaches to culture and history always do: allow us to see what would otherwise remain hidden or obscured. Gilroy's work is exemplary here, for in it he takes on some of the most important and difficult questions of black Atlantic culture and history: What is identity? What is diaspora? How can we conceive community, aesthetics, and politics in diasporic (non-)identity? With those questions, Gilroy is able to make crucial, often provocative interventions in contemporary cultural debates ranging from the meaning of race to black musical culture to the place of cars and consumerism in questions of black identity. Such issues speak directly to the present and future of black lives, meanings, and politics. If there is one 'learning goal' in this course, it is this: learn to think with and, at times, against Gilroy's work, which means, in the end, being able to read cultural forms and objects

critically through the frame and lens of black Atlantic theory and its complex theory of historical experience.

Course requirements : the requirements of this course are straightforward. You are required to come to class, contribute to discussion, write two essays, and make a number of contributions to a ‘black Atlantic glossary’ project we’ll undertake as a class.

Two essays – both will be 8-10 pages in length. The first essay (‘literacy’) will focus on clarifying some of the key conceptual terms and arguments in Gilroy’s theory of the black Atlantic, which will help ground your understanding of the course. The second essay (‘facility’) asks you to examine in detail a site of black Atlantic culture, which will allow you to work creatively with black Atlantic theory in relation to any variety of cultural forms or objects.

Glossary – *details to come* on this project, but the aim is simple: as a class, we will track key terms in Gilroy’s work and elaborate them in a series of definitions. Each student will be assigned specific terms, but all will be expected to contribute to the task of clarifying, expanding, and so on.

Classroom – you must attend every class. Although Gilroy is a clear and engaging writer, the concepts are complex and multi-layered, so class discussion will surely prove crucial to your understanding of the material. As well, the classroom is a learning community and, as a member of that community, you are responsible for sharing your thoughts and insights with your fellow students. We’re all the better for your questions. I expect you to come to class on time, prepared for discussion with questions, having done the reading, etc. Standard stuff.

No more than three absences are allowed without penalty.

Schedule of Readings

25 January

Introduction to the course

27 January

Kant and Hegel on history

1 February

Benjamin and Du Bois on history

3 February

Fanon, 'On National Culture'

8 February

Bhabha, 'DissemiNation'

10 February

Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, Preface & Ch. I

15 February

Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, Ch. II

17 February

Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, Ch. III

22 February

Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, Ch. IV

24 February

Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, Ch. V

1 March

Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, Ch. VI

3 March

Gilroy, *Against Race*, Ch. I

8 March

Gilroy, *Against Race*, Ch. III

10 March

Gilroy, *Against Race*, Ch. VI

15 – 17 March

Spring Break. Bye.

22 March

Gilroy, *Against Race*, Ch. VII

24 March

Gilroy, *Against Race*, Ch. IX

29 March

Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*,
'Introduction'

31 March

Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Ch. I

5 April

Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Ch. II

7 April

Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Ch. III

12 April

Gilroy, *Darker than Blue*, Ch. I

14 April

Gilroy, *Darker than Blue*, Ch. II

19 April

Gilroy, *Darker than Blue*, Ch. III

21 April

Fanon, 'On National Culture'
Gates, Jr., 'Critical Fanonism'

26 April

Afro Modern, pgs. 8-57

28 April

Afro Modern, pgs. 58-63
Glissant, from *Poetics of Relation*

3 May

Afro Modern, pgs. 64-81

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5 May

Final conversation