

**BLACK POPULAR CULTURE
AADS/COMMUNICATION 218201
Spring 2015**

Professor Anjali Vats, J.D., Ph.D.
Monday & Wednesday 3:00pm - 4:20pm
Gasson Hall 309

Office Hours
Monday & Wednesday 11:00 am - 12:00pm
St. Mary's Hall S355



COURSE OBJECTIVES

This class critically examines the definitions and development of black popular culture from the rise of blackface minstrelsy performances in the 1800s to the present day. We will primarily focus on black popular culture in the United States but we will also consider the work of diasporic authors and artists and the international implications of American media. The readings in the course will draw upon theories and concepts in media studies, cultural studies, and rhetoric to center our discussion of black popular cultural texts such as television shows, films, music, poetry, and fashion. They will also repeatedly ask us to interrogate our conceptions of popular culture, “authenticity,” blackness, black masculinity, black femininity, and respectability. Assignments include quizzes, two short papers, and a creative project requiring non-traditional engagement with a black popular cultural text.

By the end of the semester, you should be able to:

- List, define, and apply key concepts in media studies, cultural studies, and rhetoric;
- Understand the historical development of black popular culture in the United States;
- Trace scholarly conversations about blackness, masculinity, femininity, and respectability;
- Demonstrate proficiency in analyzing and interpreting black popular cultural texts;
- Select an object of study drawn from black popular culture;
- Produce short papers analyzing and interpreting black popular cultural texts; and
- Create a non-paper project which critically engages a black popular cultural text of your choice.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Articles available from the course website

ASSIGNMENTS

Below are brief descriptions of the assignments in this course. We will discuss each assignment in greater depth closer to its due date.

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|-----------------|----------------------------|
| • Quizzes | 400 points/100 points each |
| • Short Essays | 300 points/150 points each |
| • Selma Review | 100 points |
| • Final Project | 200 points |

QUIZZES: You will take four in-class quizzes this semester. The quizzes will cover (approximately) the preceding five classes' worth of readings and lectures will *not* be cumulative.

SHORT ESSAYS: You will complete two short essays of three to five pages in this class. For the first essay, you will be asked to analyze a black popular culture text using concepts from class. For the second essay, you will be asked to draft a proposal of your final project for review.

SELMA REVIEW: At some point prior to the class discussion of civil rights on February 9th, you must watch the newly released film *Selma* and write a two page, single spaced review of it.

FINAL PROJECT: For your final project for the course, you will select a black popular cultural text to analyze and interpret using course concepts. The major requirement for this assignment is that you carry out your analysis and interpretation of the text in some way other than writing a paper (e.g. multimedia presentation, poster, zine, film, website, mobile, stand-up comedy routine, television script, video montage, photojournalist project, YouTube video, sculpture, Tumbler). For inspiration and examples see www.harlotofthearts.org, mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/recent-posts, www.nocaptionneeded.com/, and www.bagnewsnotes.com/.

GRADING

Your final course grade will be determined by the total number of points earned with respect to the following total point grading scale:

A	950 - 1000
A-	920 - 949
B+	881 - 919
B	851 - 880
B-	821 - 850
C+	781 - 820
C	751 - 780
C-	721 - 750
D+	681 - 720
D	651 - 680
D-	621 - 650
F	0 - 620

Grades will be assigned on a standard A-F scale.

Grades are computed according to university policy as follows: A = 4.0, A- = 3.66, B+ = 3.33, B = 3.0, B- = 2.66, C+ = 2.33, C = 2.0, C- = 1.66, D+ = 1.33, D = 1.0, D- = .66, F = 0. I will be happy to let you know your “grade so far” at any point in the course. You can also calculate it yourself based on the total points you have received in the class.

CLASS POLICIES

Class policies are explicitly listed here for your benefit as well as mine. Please review them thoroughly as I will strictly abide by them. Also, please note that this syllabus is subject to change at my discretion. Changes will be announced in class and noted on the course website when possible.

CLASSROOM ETIQUETTE

We will discuss many controversial and difficult topics in this course. In doing so, we will strive to cultivate a safe classroom space in which each of us is comfortable expressing an opinion. Such a task requires respect, radical acceptance, thoughtfulness, and self-awareness. Harassing or discriminatory language and/or behavior or any other conduct which creates a hostile environment will not be tolerated. That is not to say we will not sometimes make mistakes in discussing difficult topics and negotiating our various identities but rather that we will continually strive to abide by the principles of safe space and address to the best of our abilities any missteps we have made. Please review the Code of Student Conduct for further clarification.

Creating a safe space also requires attentiveness and engagement. Showing up late to class, texting, sleeping, or any other variety of disrespectful and disruptive behavior may result in you being asked to leave the classroom. If you have questions or concerns related to respect and openness, please do not hesitate to talk with me. My door is always open.

ATTENDANCE

Attendance is required as a condition of successful completion of all courses in the Department of Communication. After missing any class session, a student is responsible for finding out about assignments, due dates, announcements, handouts, and so forth that were covered during the missed session, and for making up any missed work. The student is also responsible for obtaining class

notes from a classmate for the session, and for learning the material from that session for any relevant exams or quizzes. Please do not email me for information about what you missed.

The equivalent of 2 weeks of absence from any course will reduce a student's course grade by one full letter grade. Absence from a combined total of 3 weeks of class meetings will result in automatic failure of the course. Thus, if the class meets once a week, 3 missed sessions equals automatic failure. If a course meets twice a week, 6 missed sessions will result in failure of the course, and a combined total of 9 missed class sessions will result in automatic failure of a course that meets 3 times per week. There are no exceptions to this rule.

Absences for any reason, including illness, personal crises, athletics or other extra-curricular activities are included in this total. If a student is involved in any activity that might require that student to miss 3 or more weeks of a particular course, then that student should not enroll in the course.

LATE ASSIGNMENTS

Students will lose half a letter grade per day an assignment is late and no assignment will be accepted more than 7 days after the due date. In the event of illness, emergency, other extenuating circumstance, or school sanctioned event, please contact me as soon as possible, providing written verification of the excused absence. Makeup assignments must be completed no later than 5 days after the original assignment due date. There are no exceptions to this policy.

EMAIL

You may contact me by email and I will respond within 24 hours, excluding weekends and holidays. I will not respond to emails regarding assignments that are due within 24 hours or less so please start your assignments well in advance of their due dates.

CELL PHONES & LAPTOPS

Cell phones are absolutely prohibited in class for any purpose. That includes making phone calls, texting, taking notes, fact-checking, or looking up the time. Individuals who use their cell phones in class will be asked to put their phones away or leave the class.

Laptop use in class is permissible for notetaking only. Disruptive activities including but not limited to watching Netflix, checking your favorite social media websites, trolling for hilarious and amazing YouTube videos, playing video games, and checking email are not permitted. I will not hesitate to ban laptops if they prove to be disruptive to the class environment.

DISABILITY SERVICES

If you are a student with a documented disability seeking reasonable accommodations in this course, please contact Kathy Duggan, (617) 552-8093, at the Connors Family Learning Center regarding learning disabilities, or Paulette Durrett, (617) 552-3470, in the Disability Services Office regarding all other types of disabilities.

GRIEVANCE POLICY

I am happy to discuss grade concerns and grievances with students. If you wish to challenge a grade, you must: (1) wait 24 hours after receiving your score, (2) email me a one page summary of your concerns, making reference to the assignment requirements, and (3) make an appointment to meet with me, during office hours or another mutually agreeable time. Grade concerns and grievances will be considered for *one week* after papers are returned, after which time grades will be final and grade challenges will no longer be accepted.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Boston College's definitions of academic and personal misconduct are outlined in the Code of Student Conduct. It your responsibility to read and understand the expectations regarding your conduct, though I am happy to answer any questions you may have regarding those expectations.

The Department holds the highest standards of academic honesty for Boston College Communication majors. The maintenance of these standards is essential to the basic functioning of the department as an academic community, and makes possible the conduct of fair, meaningful, and worthwhile educational experiences. Because the faculty of this department takes academic honesty so seriously, we remind all students in all Communication courses of the academic integrity statement signed by all students upon matriculation at Boston College.

Please reread the statement carefully. Instances of cheating, plagiarism, dishonesty, or collusion will be treated seriously within the Department of Communication. Sanctions for such breaches of academic integrity will include failure of the course, ejection from the major, and/or expulsion from Boston College. All cases will be referred to the Department chairperson or the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. If you are unclear on the definitions of cheating, plagiarism, dishonesty, or collusion, please do not hesitate to ask me for clarification.

In order to help ensure honesty in written work submitted as part of the course requirements for courses within the Department of Communication, departmental policy requires that ALL written assignments for ALL departmental courses be handed in on diskette as well as on paper. The diskettes will routinely be checked for plagiarized material through a professional service that analyzes the content of the work against a broad range of internet and online databases. *Written work will not be accepted unless it is accompanied by a diskette version.*

A copy of the Statement on Academic Integrity from the College of Arts and Sciences is attached to the end of this syllabus for your review. Again, please do not hesitate to contact me with questions.

SCHEDULE AND READINGS

January 12

Syllabus & Introduction

- *Black Is, Black Ain't* [in class]
- Hall, "What is this 'black' in black popular culture?"

January 14

Blackness & Popular Culture

- Johnson, “Introduction” in *Appropriating Blackness*
 - Storey, “What is popular culture?”
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January 19

NO CLASS - MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. DAY

January 21

Race & Media Studies

- Kellner, “Cultural studies, multiculturalism, and media culture”
 - Hall, “The whites of their eyes”
 - The Guardian, “Stuart Hall obituary,”
<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/feb/10/stuart-hall>
-

January 26

Blackface Minstrelsy

- *The Jazz Singer*, featuring Al Jolson [in class]
- Lott, “Love and theft: The racial unconscious of blackface minstrelsy”

January 28

The Harlem Renaissance

- McKay, “The tropics in New York” [in class]
 - Favor, “Discourses of black identity: The elements of authenticity,” in *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance*
-

February 2

*****QUIZ #1*****

February 4

Into the Jazz Age

- Music TBD [in class]
 - Neal, “Legislating freedom, commodifying struggle: Civil rights, Black Power, and the struggle for black musical hegemony,” in *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*
-

February 9

Selma to Montgomery

- *Eyes on the Prize* [in class]
- Rushdy, “Exquisite corpse”

*****SELMA REVIEW DUE*****

February 11

Any Means Necessary

- *Malcolm X*, featuring Denzel Washington [in class]
- Stevens, “Subject to countermemory: Disavowal and black manhood”

February 16

The Black Arts Movement

- Baraka, “Against bourgeois art,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehRSCQn38Ho> [in class]
- Smith, “The Black Arts Movement and its critics”
- NPR, “Amiri Baraka’s legacy: Both controversial and achingly beautiful,” <http://www.npr.org/2014/01/09/261101520/amiri-baraka-poet-and-co-founder-of-black-arts-movement-dies-at-79>

February 18

Blaxploitation

- *Foxy Brown*, featuring Pam Grier [in class]
- Quinn, “From oppositional readers to positional producers”

February 23

*****QUIZ #2*****

February 25

The Rise of the Black Sitcom: *The Cosby Show* to *Black-ish*

- *The Cosby Show* [in class]
- Havens, “‘The biggest show in the world:’ Race and the global popularity of *The Cosby Show* [excerpts]

*****ESSAY #1 DUE*****

March 2

NO CLASS – SPRING BREAK

March 4

NO CLASS – SPRING BREAK

March 9

The Rise of the Black Sitcom: *Gimme a Break* to *Living Single*

- *Gimme a Break*, featuring Nell Carter [in class]
- Collins, “Mammies, matriarchs, and other controlling images”
- Fuller, “The ‘black sex goddess’ in the living room: Making interracial sex ‘laughable’ on *Gimme a Break*” [excerpts]

March 11

The King of Pop

- *Motown 25*, featuring Michael Jackson [in class]
 - Davis, “Surgical passing”
 - NYT, “A star idolized and haunted: Michael Jackson dies at 50,” <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/26/arts/music/26jackson.html?pagewanted=all& r=0>
-

March 16	<p>Black Masculinities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The art of Robert Mapplethorpe [in class] • Mercer, “Black masculinity and the sexual politics of race”
March 18	<p>Post-Soul Aesthetics and Consumer Culture</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The Radiant Child</i> [in class] • Rodrigues, “SAMO as an escape clause: Jean-Michel Basquiat’s engagement with a commodified African Americanism”
March 23	<p>***QUIZ #3***</p>
March 25	<p>Black Athleticism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barbara Walters, interviewing Mike Tyson [in class] • Enck-Wanzer, “All’s fair in love and sport: Black masculinity and domestic violence in the news”
March 30	<p>Black Femininities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tyler Perry Film TBD [in class] • Lyle, “Check with yo’ man first; check with yo’ man”: Tyler Perry appropriates drag as a tool to recirculate patriarchal ideology
April 1	<p>Hip Hop Politics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Music TBD [in class] • Enck and McDaniel, “Playing with fire: Cycles of domestic violence in Eminem and Rhianna’s ‘Love the Way You Lie’” <p>***ESSAY #2 DUE***</p>
April 6	<p>NO CLASS - EASTER</p>
April 8	<p>Hip Hop Politics (cont’d)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Empire</i> [in class] • Martinez, “Popular culture as oppositional culture” • Kennedy, “‘Empire’ sends a powerful LGBT message,” http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-st-fox-empire-hip-hop-lgbt-essay-20150106-story.html

April 13

Queen Bey

- “Check on it” [in class]
- Durham, ““Check on it”: Beyonce, Southern booty, and black femininities in music video”

April 15

*****QUIZ #4*****

April 20

NO CLASS - PATRIOT'S DAY

April 22

Resisting Post-Identity, Obama Style

- Obama inauguration [in class]
 - Joseph, ““Hope is finally making a comeback”: First Lady reframed”
-

April 27

Race Post-Race

- The iconography of blackness [in class]
- Casselman, “It’s incredibly rare for a grand jury to do what Ferguson’s just did,”
<http://fivethirtyeight.com/datalab/ferguson-michael-brown-indictment-darren-wilson/>
- Stephens, “In defense of the Ferguson riots,”
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/08/in-defense-of-the-ferguson-riots/>
- Lopez, “A one chart summary of every Ferguson eyewitness’s grand jury testimony,”
<http://www.vox.com/xpress/2014/11/26/7295595/eyewitnesses-ferguson-grand-jury>
- Williams, “A hallucination of your worst fears,”
http://www.salon.com/2014/11/26/a_hallucination_of_your_worst_fears_legal_scholar_patricia_williams_on_what_darren_williams_testimony_reveals_about_racism_in_america/

April 29

Defining Blackness, Redux

- Gilroy, “Race ends here”
 - Cooper, “I am utterly undone,”
http://www.salon.com/2014/11/25/i_am_utterly_undone_my_struggle_with_black_rage_and_fear_after_ferguson/
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May 4

NO CLASS - STUDY DAY

May 5

*****FINAL PROJECTS DUE*****

Statement on Academic Integrity from the College of Arts and Sciences

The College [of Arts and Sciences] expects all students to adhere to the accepted norms of intellectual honesty in their academic work. Any forms of cheating, plagiarism, or dishonesty or collusion in another's dishonesty is a fundamental violation of these norms.

CHEATING is the use or attempted use of unauthorized aids in any exam or other academic exercise submitted for evaluation. This includes data falsification; the fabrication of data; deceitful alteration of collected data included in a report; copying from another student's work; unauthorized cooperation in doing assignments or during an examination; the use of purchased essays, term papers, or preparatory research for such papers; submission of the same written work in more than one course without prior written approval from the instructor(s) involved; and dishonesty in requests for either extensions or papers or make-up examinations.

PLAGIARISM is the deliberate act of taking the words, ideas, data illustrative material, or statements of someone else, without full and proper acknowledgment, and presenting them as one's own.

COLLUSION is assisting or attempting to assist another student in an act of academic dishonesty. As part of your scholarly development, you must learn how to work cooperatively in a community of scholars and fruitfully utilize the work of others without violating the norms of intellectual honesty. You have a responsibility to learn the parameters of collaboration and the proper forms for quoting, summarizing and paraphrasing.

Faculty members who detect any form of academic dishonesty have the responsibility to take appropriate action. The faculty member also has the responsibility to report the incident and penalty to the Department Chairperson and the appropriate Class Dean. The report will remain in your student file until you graduate.

If the gravity of the offense seems to warrant it or if the faculty member prefers that another academic authority decide the matter, he or she may refer the case to a Dean. In addition, if the student is unwilling to accept the faculty member's decision, he or she may choose to have the matter adjudicated either by an Associate Dean or by an Administrative Board. The section of the College of Arts and Sciences in the Boston College Undergraduate Catalogue has further details about this process.

Academic integrity is a very important matter. If you have any questions in any of your courses about what is allowed or not allowed, please discuss the matter immediately with the instructor.