

PROPOSAL

Liberal Education Theme: Race, Power, and Justice in the United States

AFRO 1011: Introduction to African American Studies

Department of African American & African Studies
College of Liberal Arts

- 1. How does this course promote historical and contemporary understandings of how systemic structural inequalities that sustain social, political, economic, and/or environmental inequities, particularly for Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color, have been constructed and perpetuated in the United States?**

This course foregrounds the coupling of freedom and unfreedom in the making of a society built upon the racial subordination of Black people in the United States. Utilizing the orientations and perspectives of historical sociology, the course interrogates the ways in which the systems of oppression and exploitation evolved and expanded over time, amid the institutionalization of the American idea of freedom and relentless expansion of regimes of dehumanization and exploitation. Each student will enter into this course to grapple with the unity of freedom and unfreedom that facilitated the race-based construction of founding principles of liberty and equality, namely the governance of human life by racist regimes and structures of power called white supremacy.

The grounding of this course's inquiry will begin with the foundational historical context: the wholesale process of turning African peoples of diverse ethnic backgrounds and religiosity into chattel, objects of private property encased in the development of race, slavery, and capitalism (what Aime Cesaire called "thingification"), beginning in the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth century, was a global process. Its impacts were far-reaching. The ascent and expansion of what became known as the United States of America, thus, was not a mere tale of nation-building (as chronicled in the central text for this course, Michael Gomez's *Reversing Sail*); it was part and parcel of the development of the modern world: empire-building and race-making and the dynamics of gendering/ungendering in it. We continue to inhabit this world today.

With this context in mind, at every turn, students are challenged to explore, with rigor, how and why, white supremacy survived at various key historical paradigmatic moments, during which the coupling of freedom and unfreedom was contested by Black struggle and resistance across the diaspora. The course will systematically evaluate flashpoints of struggles toward the radical transformation of democracy in the United States and the world over -- from the birth of the U.S. Republic and global abolitionism to the extension of Jim Crow modernity and European colonialism throughout much of the twentieth century and efforts to respond to concentrated poverty and other anti-democratic, neoliberal, and neocolonial forces at work in contemporary times -- so as to come to grips with the renewal of racist regimes and structures of power.

The focal point of analysis, thus, is the imbrication of race, power, and justice. The course is certainly rooted in an understanding of power, but it is not simply about “racial power.” The field of Black Studies gets misnamed/framed as “race studies.” The field is centered in the agency of Black people. It is grounded in the dialectic between fighting the power (racial capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, etc.) and understanding Blackness as lived possibility. Such a critical insight into the workings of power informs how this course imparts the knowledge of theory and practice against white supremacy. It is fundamentally about how Black/African peoples have built lives in this country and beyond. How they have resisted and rearticulated possibility.”

2. How does this course focus entirely on racial justice or may focus on the structural inequalities facing other marginalized groups in the United States. However, all courses must substantively integrate issues of racial justice, whether the course focuses centrally on issues of race, or focuses on other forms of difference (e.g., ethnicity, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, citizenship status, disability)?

This course places front and center a systematic analysis of the production of difference through domination, namely race-making in relation to the development of capitalism and other systems of oppression, such as male domination. The method of historical sociology is best suited to interrogate the manner in which the interlocking systems of oppression based on race, class, and gender had come to be made and remade through time and space to perpetuate conditions of disenfranchisement, impoverishment, and premature death. Above all, historical sociology helps achieve clarity on the unfinished struggle for democracy, specifically the nature of political and economic challenges unmet: that is, the creation of a truly humane and just society.

To foreground the imperative of racial justice as the center-lane of students’ intellectual growth in this course requires establishing the historical context to explore varying ways in which Black people lived through and banded and struggled together to contend with the experience, corruption, and absurdity of race, namely the very construction of whiteness as power, property, and advantage. The course delivers the knowledge of key characteristics of Black people’s cultural integrity. Thus, the required coursework (short and longer critical reflection papers in response to assigned reading and midterm in-class and take-home exams) make explicit the expectation that students will have to critically reflect on and evaluate the challenges of Black liberation, especially both differences and continuities in conditions of oppression and demands for democracy and full citizenship, then and now, so as to imagine and think concretely how we might reimagine social change in the 21st century.

What did Black people, then and now, do with what was done to them by forces designed to narrow and degrade the sphere of freedom? How did they seek to address and overcome iterations of historical injustices to set new norms for a committed human life to deliver a more just future? Students will come away with a clear-cut understanding that the tradition of historical Black struggle transmits a qualitatively different set of values - cultural authority - derived from a deep commitment to mutuality, solidarity, collective wellbeing, antiracism, and decolonization, all of which are the bedrock of African American studies as a self/structure transforming discipline.

3. How does this course amplify voices and scholarship from Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color?

One of the key approaches to help students to achieve the depth of knowledge on matters of the imbrication of race, justice, and power and especially the enormous shaping of Black cultural integrity is to foreground lessons drawn from Black women's resistance through slavery and freedom and concrete engagement with the key tenets of Black feminist thought and practice -- self-reliance, self-definition, self-care, self-love, and self-education -- which are harnessed and amplified through collective practice and the ethos of constant struggle to fulfill the goal of human liberation.

For instance, enslaved women's struggle to maintain family ties and broader kinship networks amid unending white male sexual aggressions toward Black women, wholesale denial of the very fact of their humanity, and the violence of family separation animated the combustible conditions of social existence. Despite the unspeakable scale of violence visited upon enslaved women, the simultaneity of denying their humanity and sexual violations and gendered violence, they forged their lives and lives of others in struggle to extend a tremendous cultural integrity to stay human. From the beginning of this course to the end, the thread of Black feminist thought governs the overall thrust, as this is evident in the assigned readings that include Angela Davis's seminal essay, "The Role of Black Women in the Community of Slaves" to Patricia Hill Collins's paradigm-setting book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*.

4. How does this course promote agency to address disparities in institutionalized systems by helping students identify specific actions to address power hierarchies and promote social justice?

In addition to conventional assignments (critical reflection papers and midterm/final exams), students are required to put together a final portfolio on explorations in engagement and social change by the end of the semester. The scope of this assignment allows students to think on their own terms to define what they mean by engagement and social change from the vantage point of their own social positions of disadvantage and advantage or historically specific experiences of minoritization. They are required to mobilize historical and sociological understandings about Black historical struggles that they have acquired through critical reflections and conversations with peers to chart the deeper comprehension of agency. How might we fashion a dynamic and critical agency that infuses the Black vision of citizenship and service with theory and practice, so as to respond to the political challenges unmet in the 21st century? Students are encouraged to be creative in presenting their portfolios with visuals and sample materials that capture the active learning component of the course.