

ENGL 692 / AAS 593: Cultural Studies: Blues Theories, Histories, Legacies (FALL 2006)

Dr. Adam Gussow 16:00 - 18:30 W

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Office Hours: Wed. 10 – 12 or by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

Rather than survey the canon of blues literature, this course will investigate the range of blues-critical discourses that have emerged in the hundred-odd years since W. C. Handy first stumbled upon the “weirdest music [he’d] ever heard” in the Mississippi Delta. Our core question is one that has bedeviled commentators from the beginning: What is, or are, the blues? We’ll move historically and thematically, from a consideration of African origins and early folkloristic and critical writings through a reconsideration of “classic” women’s blues and the emergence of modern blues scholarship. The Black Arts movement is a crucial watershed; we’ll explore the Karenga/Neal dispute and several blues-critical visions that emerge in response to this era. Blues discourses proliferate in our postmodern moment, seeking to account for the whitening of the blues audience, the rise of blues tourism, and the emergence of Robert Johnson as a cultural icon. Finally, we’ll explore a curious example of cultural transformation and hybridity: the emergence of a full-blown, self-policing blues subculture in post-Soviet Russia.

This course meets the theory requirement.

COURSE TEXTS:

Gerhard Kubik, *Africa and the Blues* (UP of Mississippi)

Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (Cambridge UP)

Adam Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (UP of Chicago)

Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (Amistad)

Michael Urban, *Russia Gets the Blues: Music, Culture, and Community in Unsettled Times* (Cornell UP)

The five course texts above, which represent roughly half of this term’s readings, are on sale at the University Bookstore. The remaining readings have been assembled into a coursepak, which can (and must!) be purchased at Copytime, just off the Square. You’re responsible for bringing the assigned reading to class on the appropriate day.

EVALUATION:

Attendance and Participation: 10%

A graduate seminar lives or dies based on the regular attendance and active participation of each of its members. While you are expected to attend every session, illness and family emergencies do happen; you may miss any two sessions without penalty. Please husband your allowable absences carefully and deploy them wisely. A third absence, for

any reason, will give you an “Attendance and Participation” grade of D; a fourth absence will result in automatic failure in the course. You get points in this category for active in-class engagement, probing questions, and perceptive comments on our reading materials. Please note: I’d like you to meet with me during my office hours at least once in the course of the term to discuss your progress in the class.

Call-and-Response Papers: 40%

You are required to write three (3) call-and-response papers in the course of the term. Each paper will consist of three parts, which you should identify with subheadings:

- 1) CALL: a paragraph or two in which you sketch, quickly but with relevant textual detail, some thematic thread, ideological stance, rhetorical strategy, or other point of interest that you’ve noticed at work in one (or several) of the week’s readings; an objectively describable way in which this text “calls” to you and/or its other readers. Think of the “call” as the nucleus or sketch of a possible paper, a quick-hit bit of close attention to the text. (Note: In weeks when we have four or five shorter readings, you probably will want to focus on two or three.)
- 2) RESPONSE: a paragraph or two in which you broaden your discussion in a way that answers one or more of the following questions: What are the stakes here? Why did/does this text *matter*? How does this text fit into and/or unsettle the tradition of blues commentary as the course is helping you to understand it? Does Wald’s *Escaping the Delta*, for example, force you to reassess (or toss out) Gussow’s *Seems Like Murder Here*?
- 3) QUESTION: one good, thought-provoking question for class discussion.

There is a strict, non-negotiable length-limit to call-and-response papers: your paper must be no longer than one page. You may play with formatting, if need be, in order to fit your text onto one page--i.e., 10-point type, single spaced, narrow margins--but you may not exceed that limit. (In the past, most students have enough to say that single-spacing turns out to be a necessity.)

On the day when you have a call-and-response paper due, you should bring enough copies for every person in seminar, including me. We’ll distribute these at the beginning of class; I’ll page through them and figure out a rough sequence in which we’ll address them. When your turn comes, you will read your paper out loud, concluding with the question, and the class as a whole will respond to your call. For obvious reasons, no late call-and-response papers will be accepted. If you are absent on a day when you have a call-and-response paper due, you must instead write a call-and-response paper for the following week’s seminar on the material to be discussed that day.

Final Paper: 50%

A standard academic research paper of approximately 20 pages. This paper should explore in depth a significant question raised by the course readings. While you’ll

probably want to focus on and/or make use of those readings, you may, with my permission, write on relevant texts not on the syllabus, including more familiar blues-literary fare--*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, for example, or the poems of Langston Hughes. Your paper should be double-spaced in 12-point type with standard (1 to 1.5") margins. You may follow either the MLA or Chicago style manual. Please come and speak with me if you have any questions or concerns here. Your term paper is due by 4 PM on Monday, December 4th at my office (C-213 Bondurant). Emailed term papers will NOT be accepted.

Late Assignments:

Graduate students are expected to turn in all assignments on time.

SCHEDULE OF READINGS AND ASSIGNMENTS:

Wed 8/23: course introduction

Wed 8/30: **Defining the Blues**
Tracy, Aschoff, Salaam
Call-and-response paper due from 1's

Wed 9/6: **African Origins**
Kubik, *Africa and the Blues*
Call-and-response paper due from 2's

Wed 9/13: **Early Folkloric Writings**
Peabody, Odum, Brown, Handy
Call-and-response paper due from 3's

Wed 9/20: **Classic Women's Blues**
Van Vechten, Hurston, Harrison, Davis
Call-and-response paper due from 4's

Wed 9/27: **"The Devil's Music"? Foundational and Revisionist Scholarship**
Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*; Spencer
Call-and-response paper due from 1's

Wed 10/4: **Chicago Blues, Modern and Postmodern**
Keil, Grazian
Call-and-response paper due from 2's

Wed 10/11: **Black Arts Revolt**
Karenga, Neal, Henderson, Cone
Call-and-response paper due from 3's

Wed 10/18: **Black Arts Legacies**
Baker, Prince, Wilson, Flowers, Bolden
Call-and-response paper due from 4's

- Fri 10/20:** **One-page description of research paper + annotated bibliography due; please email to instructor by 4 PM**
- Wed 10/25: **Cultural Studies I: Violence and Abjection**
Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here*
Call-and-response paper due from 1's
- Wed 11/1: **Cultural Studies II: White Mythologies and the Black Popular**
Wald, *Escaping the Delta*; Schroeder
Call-and-response paper due from 2's
- Wed 11/8: **Authenticity, Postmodernity, Tourism**
King, Leitsch, Gussow
Call-and-response paper due from 3's
- Wed 11/15: **World Culture**
Urban, *Russia Gets the Blues*
Call-and-response paper due from 4's
- Wed 11/29: concluding thoughts. Sharing of research projects (5-10 minutes per student, including discussion).
- Mon 12/4: **Research paper due at instructor's office by 4 PM**