

AMST 285gm: African American Popular Culture (Updated 9/10/15)

Section 10399 Fall 2015 T/Th 12:30-1:50PM GFS 116

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Office Hours: T/Th 11AM-12PM; also by appt. You can also contact me Monday-Friday via email.

Course Website: Course materials are accessible through Blackboard; to access, click on:
<https://blackboard.usc.edu/>

Required Texts:

1. AMST 285 Reader. [This text is abbreviated RDR in the Reading & Exam Schedule.]
2. Hall, Stuart, Jessica Evans, and Sean Nixon. 2013. Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices. 2nd Edition. London: Sage.
3. Mooney, Paul. 2009. Black is the New White: A Memoir. London: Gallery Books.
4. Neal, Mark Anthony. 2002. Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic. London: Routledge.

Highly Recommended Texts:

5. Zinsser, William. 2001. On Writing Well. Sixth Edition. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

NOTE: Required and Optional Texts are on reserve in Leavey Library.

Course Description: This iteration of AMST 285gm examines how authenticity – or notions of “the/a real” act as a galvanizing force in African American popular culture, shaping the way African Americans are represented and perceived in the world. This preoccupation with “a/the real” no doubt beckons another; namely, what does it *mean* to “be real? Further, isn’t realness and notions of “authentic Blackness” subjective at best? Such questions (and sure-fire answers) will be addressed in this course with considerable optimism and trust – trust that the tools of social analysis will help us unpack the socially-constructed and historically-contingent nature of race, representation, and authenticity during uncertain times, and hope that if we are present, prepared, and open, we’ll collectively discover how and why notions of “the real” have animated Black popular culture in the past, present, and (likely) the unforeseen future. In particular, we will excavate allusions to “the/a real” in Black cinematic tropes and genres (e.g., Blaxploitation), sonic innovations (e.g., blues, gospel, hip hop), corporeal engagements (e.g., “Krump” and other “Black” dance forms), as well as the affective rhythms, flows, beats, and agentive feelings these systems of representation incite about “real Blackness,” “real soul,” “real freedom,” and “realness” writ large. Our study this semester focuses on but a selection of the vast archive of African American popular culture; we will occasionally jump back and forth across time, space, and texts to unearth thematic and historical connections within this vast canon of songs, films, photos, poems, dance, and other sonic, corporeal, visual and embodied texts. Let your excitement build: with “authenticity” and it’s more gracious conceptual kin, “sincerity,” as our steady through-line, we stand to learn how and why concerns about “a/the real” act as an enduring provocation in African American popular culture, if not our own society and lives.

Learning Objectives: Upon the successful completion of this course, you should also be able to:

- Understand and explicate the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and other modalities of identity in the everyday work and systems (e.g., popular culture) of representation
- Articulate concepts, theories, and methods of Cultural Studies, African American Studies, and Media Studies scholarship as they relate to the humanities
- Understand, develop, and articulate an analysis of race, representation, and authenticity and their complex relationships to social and economic justice
- Critically situate popular culture as a critical arena for racial identity and representation and a site for liberatory social change

Grading: There will be a midterm and final exam covering assigned readings, films, and guest speakers. The midterm is worth 30% (30 points) and the final exam is worth 40% (40 points) of your overall grade. Each of the exams will include short-answer and essay questions and will be non-cumulative. In addition, 10% (10 points) of your grade will be determined by your class participation. As such, you are strongly encouraged to be punctual, maintain regular attendance, and stay abreast of assigned readings so that you are adequately prepared to participate in class discussions. The remaining 20% of your grade will be determined by four to five page essay (excluding bibliography of 5-7 sources) that address issues of authenticity in any realm of African American popular culture. This essay is worth up to 20 points and will be **due at 5PM in your T.A.'s box in KAP 458 on Thursday, November 5th** (no electronic copies; hard copies only). **Late papers will be docked 2 points and 1 additional point for every day late [NO exceptions].** Finally, a total of 4 extra-credit points can be earned on the midterm and final exam via a two-point Bonus Question. Bonus questions will be based on “optional” readings and/or additional materials presented in class.

Essay Guidelines: Essays must adhere to the following format: double-spaced, 12 point-font, 1” top, bottom, right, and left margins, pages numbered consecutively in upper right hand corner. Each essay should span 4-5 pages max. Your essays should address how notions or representations of racial, gendered, class, etc. authenticity manifest in the present, either in film or everyday contexts; in either case, you will need to approach your analysis anthropologically. You will also be responsible for substantiating your claims by citing 5-7 sources [citations must adhere to APA/MLA format]. Your bibliography can include assigned course readings. However, at least three of these sources must include an article or book that is **not** in the course bibliography; note that webpage citations must include substantial commentaries (e.g., articles, book chapters) versus blurbs, advertisements, Wikipedia, or other web-based sources. (Additional guidelines for essays will be posted in Blackboard.) The grading scale is as follows:

94-100 = A	87-89 = B+	77-79 = C+	67-69 = D+	> 59 = F
90-93 = A-	84-86 = B	74-76 = C	64-66 = D	
	80-83 = B-	70-73 = C-	60-63 = D-	

GRADE BASIS
Midterm: 30%
Authenticity Essay: 20%
Final: 40%
Participation: 10%

An Official Note on Examinations: Make-up exams will only be given under extraordinary circumstances and will require documentation from a physician. The content and form of any make-up exam will be at my discretion. In any case, you should inform me via email or phone prior to missing an exam. If you feel you must reschedule an exam on account of having (a) two additional exams scheduled at the same time or (b) three exams in a 24-hour period, inform me at least two weeks prior to our scheduled mid-term. The final exam must be taken at the time noted below. **Also, late essays will only be accepted in exceptional cases and will be deducted a minimum of 2 points.**

Attendance: A grading percentage will not be given for class attendance. However, consistent and punctual attendance in seminar is strongly encouraged to increase your understanding of course materials and enhance your participation score. Your record of attendance may also be considered in the case of borderline grades. It is ultimately your responsibility to be aware of class lectures and assignments. Should sickness, family emergencies, or other events necessitate your absence from class, I recommend that you consult your peers and/or Blackboard for lecture notes.

Class Structure & Resources: Class meetings will consist of lecture and discussion, with a clear emphasis on the latter. As such, it is essential that you keep up with the weekly readings and that you submit assignments on time. At times, film clips will be shown in class. Resources for this course are available through Blackboard. Consult Blackboard for access to the course syllabus, grades, essay guidelines, announcements, mock essay and short answer questions, exam study guides, and other helpful information. Your Teaching Assistants for this class are AMST graduate scholars **Sabrina Howard** (smhoward@usc.edu) and **Nicole Richards** (ndrichar@usc.edu). Discussion sections will convene on Wednesdays at 3-3:50PM and 4-4:50PM in THH B10 [Sabrina's sections] and Fridays at 10-10:50AM and 11-11:50AM in VKC 205 [Nicole's sections].

Academic Conduct: Plagiarism – presenting someone else's ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Section 11, [Behavior Violating University Standards](#). Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* regarding university policies on [scientific misconduct](#).

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the [Office of Equity and Diversity](#) or to the [Department of Public Safety](#). This is important for the safety of the whole USC community. Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. [The Center for Women and Men](#) provides 24/7 confidential support, and the [Sexual Assault Resource Center webpage](#) describes reporting options and other resources.

Support Systems: A number of USC's schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more about [The Writing Center](#), or consult them directly. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the [American Language Institute](#), which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. Additionally, [The Office of Disability Services and Programs](#) provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, [USC Emergency Information](#) will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.

READING & EXAM SCHEDULE*

RACE, REPRESENTATION, AND POLITICS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

- Week 1:** EARLY REPRESENTATIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE U.S.
8/25
8/27
- Hall: Chapter 4: The Spectacle of the `Other`
 - Krasner: The Real Thing [in RDR]
 - Sewell: Mammies and Matriarchs [in RDR]
 - Film: *Ethnic Notions* (1986; 57 mins.)
- Week 2:** REPRESENTING AFRICAN AMERICANS IN PRIME TIME TV
9/1
9/3
- Hall: Chapter 1: The Work of Representation
 - Hunt: Making Sense of Blackness on Television [in RDR]
 - Film(s): *Color Adjustment* (1991; 87 mins.)
- Week 3:** REPRESENTING A “BLACK REAL” IN CINEMA: BLAXPLOITATION
9/8
9/10
- Harris & Mushtaq: Creating Racial Identities through Film [in RDR]
 - Neal: Chapter 2: Sweetback’s Revenge
 - Robinson: Blaxploitation and the Misrepresentation of Liberation [in RDR]
 - Film: *Baadasssss Cinema: A Bold Look at 70s Blaxploitation Films* (2002; 60 mins.)

INTERROGATING AUTHENTICITY IN BLACK POPULAR CULTURE

- Week 4:** INTERROGATING RACIAL AUTHENTICITY IN THE “EVERYDAY”
9/15
9/17
- Chin: Authenticity [in RDR]
 - Jackson: Real Fictions [*Optional*; in RDR]
 - Jackson: A Little Black Magic [in RDR]
 - Japtok & Jenkins: What Does It Mean to Be “Really” Black? [in RDR]
 - Moore: Authenticity as Authentication [in RDR]
 - Film: *Black Is ... Black Ain’t* (1994; 88 mins.)
- Week 5:** REPRESENTING “BLACK AUTHENTICITY” IN THEATER & FILM
9/22
9/24
- Cartier: Black Women On-Screen as Future Texts [in RDR]
 - Collins: Activists Who Yearn for Art that Transforms [in RDR]
 - Forsgren: The Black Arts Movement (1956-1976) [in RDR]
 - Smith: Affect and Respectability Politics [in RDR]
 - Tyson et al.: It’s Not A “Black Thing” [*Optional*; in RDR]
 - Film: *Black Girl* (1972; 97 mins.)
- Week 6:** EXCAVATING “A REAL” IN AFRICAN AMERICAN SOUL MUSIC
9/29
10/1
- Hall: Chapter 2: Recording Reality: Documentary Film and Television
 - Hall: What is “Black” in “Black Popular Culture”? [in RDR]
 - Neal: Chapter 1: “You Remind Me of Something”
 - Film: *Wattstax* (1973; 1hr 43 mins.)
- Week 7:** AUTHENTICATING AMERICAN POPULAR MUSIC THROUGH SOUL
10/6 **Midterm**
10/8
- Brooks: “All That You Can’t Leave Behind” [in RDR]
 - James: “Robo-Diva R&B” [*Optional*; in RDR]
 - Bruce: “The People Inside My Head, Too” [in RDR]
 - Film: *20 Feet from Stardom* (2013; 1 hr 31 mins.)

MIDTERM ON TUE (NO BLUE BOOKS REQUIRED; JUST BRING A PEN)

- Week 8:** **QUEERING “THE REAL” ON THE DANCE FLOOR**
 10/13
 10/15
- Gill: Situating Black, Situating Queer [in RDR]
 - hooks: Is Paris Burning? [in RDR]
 - Johnson & Henderson: Introduction, Black Queer Studies [*Optional*; in RDR]
 - Reid-Pharr: Sweet Black Bad Ass, Or Who Is This Queer Black and Black Queer Studies? [in RDR]
 - Film: *Paris is Burning* (1990; 78 mins.)
- Week 9:** **“REAL” BLACK AESTHETICS IN HIP HOP**
 10/20
 10/22
- Bey: Swagger [in RDR]
 - Fleetwood: Hip-Hop Fashion, Masculine Anxiety, and the Discourse of Americana [in RDR]
 - Harkness: Hip Hop and America’s Most Taboo Word [*Optional*; in RDR]
 - McLeod: Authenticity within Hip Hop and Other Cultures Threatened with Assimilation [*Optional*; in RDR]
 - Penney: “We Don’t Wear Tight Clothes” [in RDR]
 - West: Keepin’ It Real [in RDR]
 - Film: *Fresh Dressed* (2015; 1 hr 30 mins.)
- Week 10:** **SPEAKING “REAL” TRUTHS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN SPOKEN WORD/POETRY**
 10/27
 10/29
- Johnson: Manning Up [in RDR]
 - Neal: Chapter 5: Native Tongues
 - Film: *Louder than A Bomb* (2010; 99 mins.) *OR To Be Heard* (2010; 87 mins.)
- Week 11:** **BIDS TO THE “REAL” IN AFRICAN AMERICAN STANDUP COMEDY**
 11/3
 11/5 **Essay due TH**
- Haggins: Dave Chappelle; Epilogue [in RDR]
 - Jacobs: Gender, Authenticity, and Hair in AfAm Standup Comedy [in RDR]
 - Jacobs: “The Arab is the New Nigger” [*Optional*; in RDR]
 - Mooney: Black is the New White
 - Senna: Passing and the Problematic of Multiracial Pride [*Optional*; in RDR]
 - Film: *Why We Laugh: Black Comedians on Black Comedy* (2009; 95 mins.); *assorted clips from Dr. Jacobs research* [clips will not be placed on reserve]
- Essays Due TH at 5PM in T.A.’s box in KAP 458 (LATE PAPERS will be docked points)**
- Week 12:** **TA GUEST LECTURE: SABRINA HOWARD**
 11/10
 11/12
- Readings: TBA
 - Film/Clips: TBA
- Week 13:** **TA GUEST LECTURE: NICOLE RICHARDS**
 11/17
 11/19
- Neal: Chapter 3: Baby Mama (Drama) and Baby Daddy (Trauma)
 - Additional Readings: TBA
 - Film/Clips: TBA
- Week 14:** **RACE, REPRESENTATION, AND SPORTS: “REAL” ATHLETES**
 11/24
 11/26 **No Class**
- Hall: Chapter 5: Exhibiting Masculinity
 - Messner et al.: The Televised Sports Manhood Formula [in RDR]
 - Film/Clips: TBA

Week 15:

12/1

12/3

**MUSINGS ON “A REAL” IN AFRICAN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE: A
CLOSER LOOK AT KEY MOMENTS**

- Broertjes: “He’s Sending His People Messages out through His Pain” [*Optional*; in RDR]
- Clay: Working Day and Night [*Optional*; in RDR]
- Curuthers & Bierria: Stay With Me [in RDR]
- Neal: Chapter 4: The Post-Soul Intelligentsia
- Pickens: Shoving Aside the Politics of Respectability [in RDR]
- Viveros: Black Authenticity, *Racial Drag*, and the Case of Dave Chappelle [in RDR]
- Film/Clips: *Michael Jackson* (“[You are the Lady in My Life](#)”), excerpts from: *This Is It* (2009; 1 hr 52 mins.); *Dave Chappelle’s Block Party* (2006; 1 hr 51 mins.), reality TV shows *Charm School* and *Bring It!*; Profs. Mark Anthony Neal and Shana Redmond’s (2015) presentations on “[Black Music and the Aesthetic of Protest](#)” panel at the UCLA Hammer Museum

FINAL EXAM: Tuesday, December 15th, 11AM-1PM, GFS 116

*Note: Syllabus is subject to edits, additions, etc.

COURSE BIBLIOGRAPHY

(NOTE: Articles are alphabetized by last name in Course Reader in Blackboard. Required and optional textbooks are included below, in bold.)

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- Broertjes, Andrew. 2013. "He's Sending His People Messages out of His Pain": Michael Jackson and the Black Community. *Popular Music and Society* 36(5): 677-698.
- Brooks, Daphne. A. 2008. "All That You Can't Leave Behind": Black Female Soul Singing and the Politics of Surrogation in the Age of Catastrophe. *Meridians* 8(1): 180-204.
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- Clay, Andreana. 2011. Working Day and Night: Black Masculinity and the King of Pop. *Popular Music and Society* 23(1): 3-18.
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- Jackson, John L. 2005. A Little Black Magic. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 104(3): 393-402.
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- Jacobs, Lanita. 2011. "The Arab is the New Nigger": African American Comics Confront the Irony and Tragedy of 9/11. *In T. Gournelos and V. Greene (Eds.) A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Have Shaped Post-9/11 America* (47-56). Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
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