

BLST 4620
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BLACK URBAN HISTORY

I. SYNOPSIS.

Although the title of this course is “Black Urban History” the approach taken is actually that of black urban studies. What I mean here is that to more effectively understand and appreciate the role black people have played in the evolution and shaping of urban America it is necessary to go beyond the limitations of any single discipline and widen our scope and methods of exploration to better encompass the many dimensions, subtleties and insensitivities of life in the city. This is true whether we are examining the colonial, imperial, industrial or post-industrial municipality that refers not just to a legally defined restricted space but also the larger environ of which it is a part.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS OF INSTRUCTION

- A. Joe W. Trotter, et al, *The African American Urban Experience*
- B. Tatcho Mendiola, Jr., et al, *Black-Brown: Relations and Stereotypes*
- C. Supplementary readings. A list of materials will be made available in the Ethnic Studies department office shortly after the beginning of the semester that you might peruse and copy to assist you in the preparation of required writing assignments due throughout the course. They are intended to supplement the required text and amplify several of the course topics.
- D. Methods of Instruction
 1. Structurally, this course is a double helix. One branch provides context while the other traces the actual experiences of the black urbanite from the seventeenth century forward. You are invited to pay close attention to the topical outline of the course as it is intended as a timeline that can be employed by you to ascertain whether there has been change in the treatment of blacks in cities and if there has been how that might be contrasted with the larger world of which the city is but a microcosm.
 2. Operationally, the course is designed more as forum than lecture. This means you must prepare for each class session in that it is probable that you may be called upon to offer information or opinion. Accordingly, you are required to take responsibility for the quality of your own education because it is a participatory process—the instructor helps those who help themselves. To learn you must question: what you know, what you

believe and, what you have previously taken on faith. There is no other way to secure a critical consciousness. Too, learning without making mistakes is not realistic. Thus worry not about making mistakes; instead, worry more about not learning from the mistakes you make. Also remember that both you and your experiences are a resource. Do not devalue these items in the quest for authoritative support of your opinions. Finally, you are asked to do two additional things. The first is secure self-discipline the only way you can master whatever talents you have. Regardless of how much talent you may believe you possess, when you have little or no discipline, you have little or no talent that is useful in your own development. And second make a commitment to the pursuit of excellence however you choose to define that word.

III. TOPICAL OUTLINE OF COURSE

A. Introductory Remarks, Scope of the Course, etc. In keeping with the urban studies approach noted in the synopsis, although the course itself is organized chronologically, you are invited to pay close attention to increases in population and population density as the nation grows and expands from the seventeenth century to the present. You are also asked to address yourselves to what changes might be brought by increased numbers of people in cities and eventually in the suburbs. Some of the specific topics you will want to examine include housing, employment, business development, and religion, education, health care, politics and public safety. You are also invited to examine the conceptual categories laid out by Douglas Henry Daniels in his book *Pioneer Urbanites: A Social and Cultural History of Black San Francisco*. Whether he is discussing "Pioneers" or "Cosmopolites" these ontological categories may assist you in exploring the many dimensions, subtleties and insensitivities of black life in the urban area.

B. The Colonial City: Life in the frontier outposts of civilization. In this portion of the course, our primary focus will be origins and first manifestations of what in time will come to be called a black community and its social organization.

C. Urban Life in Antebellum America: North and South. This part of the course overlaps a little the previous rubric in that we want to examine is the continuing evolution of black social institutions inclusive of churches, schools, literary societies, protest groups, newspapers and the like. We will look at similar phenomena in the South and add to it the contradictions of slavery in the cities especially the difficulties experiences by masters of disciplining and controlling their chattel who were at the same time a source of revenue.

D. Post Civil War Urban Growth and Development. With the end of the War Between the States, black people were no longer property and not yet citizens of the realm regardless of the intent of the writers of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. They were very much "Strangers in a Strange Land" who were now charged with the task of learning the "new" rules of the

game. It is also during this period that people began to migrate from the rural hinterland to the city in search of new opportunities whether they were in the East, the North, or the West coincident with the expansion of the Frontier.

E. The Twentieth Century City To 1930. By the beginning of this century there were numerous small black communities throughout the United States and its territories. As these communities expanded in size and density, they came face-to-face with all manner of urban problems. Some of these, segregated housing, inferior municipal services and the like, would be termed by some causative factors in the formation of the “Ghetto” that is a less than appropriate and adequate term to illustrate and explain the character and properties of an internal colony within the mother country. Yet there was also the automobile whose availability would begin to erode the boundaries of those enclaves much to the dismay of those who sought to preserve, protect and defend their space as private property. There are a number of other items that transpire during this period occasioned in part by the Great Migration that begins in 1915 to fill labor shortages effected by the war and the slowing and eventual restriction prohibition of European in-migration. This period also seems an increase in black literary, protest—the rise of Marcus Garvey and the UNIA in particular—and political activity that results in the first representative from Chicago to the Congress since 1901. Also emerging herein are the NAACP and the National Urban League. Near the end of this period black people were already experiencing the economic slowdown that would hit them with awesome force following the collapse of the Stock Market in October of 1929. They would not see any real relief until the onset of World War II in 1940.

F. The Twentieth Century City, 1931 to 1945. This section of the course deals primarily with depression and war and its consequences. There is herein another sizeable migration much of which went West as well as North seeking a chance implicit in the New Deal that evolved into the build-up for World War II and its material and personnel needs. With increased population Blacks in cities could demand and did demand more attention to their needs and the barriers to equitable participation in the social order. And, too, the monies secured by working in the defense plants would provide the capital that would allow black people to relocate outside the confines of the colony once the war had ended.

G. The Twentieth Century City, 1946 to 1960. This interval was primarily about adjustment and seizing new opportunities brought about by a changed consciousness in the black community and the challenges being brought to the infrastructure of racism that had long existed to damp the potential of the Afro American. Unfortunately, economic opportunity on the black side was less than robust. Still there were some modest changes in housing and education as the modern “civil rights movement” began to pick up steam.

H. The Twentieth Century City, 1961 to 1980. Optimism. Doubt. Disenchantment. These three words say much about this period that saw both “Model Cities” and the “Long Hot Summers” of urban violence. The “Revolution of Rising Expectations”, evocative of the mindset of the baby boomers, trumped the climate of benign neglect operant before the dawn of

Camelot. Indeed, for black people the “American Dream” became more of an obstacle course and scavenger hunt than it had been before.

I. The Twentieth Century City, 1981 to 2000. Claude Brown, author of *Manchild in the Promised Land*, opine in the sixth episode of the video series, *Making Sense of the Sixties*, That with the deaths of Martin King and Bobby Kennedy, the black community in particular lost hope respecting the ability of the United States to revitalize itself as an humane nation. Neither did the political leadership of the period endear itself to the Afro American given its concern with capital exploitation, overseas adventurism to assuage the pain of Vietnam, and the desire to begin building an “Emerging Republican Majority” that would work to reshape the priorities and policies of the country as we are now seeing with the last two elections. Yes there has been an increase in the number of black publicly elected officials. Yes there are dark faces in high places. But in some ways we are not as well off as we used to be. The import thereof is reserved for the final section of the course.

J. At the Dawn of A New Era?

L. Review, Summary and Conclusions

IV. MEASURES AND METHODS OF PERFORMANCE EVALUATION

A. DISCUSSION AND ASSIGNMENT QUESTIONS

1. Ira Berlin has argued in his *Slaves Without Masters* that this characterization accurately describes Blacks in cities. Given what you are learning about black life in the urban area, at least up to the outbreak of the civil war, what say you of his characterization? Is there a characterization of your own that you would offer to describe black life in the city since that time or has the character of that life evolved with time?

2. People migrate for a host of reasons. Looking at the reasons offered by many of the black migrants who left the South between 1910 and 1930 as a way of increasing their opportunities to improve the conditions of their existence, how do you feel, believe they fared? What kinds of adjustments do you feel they had to make as the contrasts between their expectations and the new realities they had to face emerged? What kinds of regrets might they have experienced? Turning next to the migrations of 1940-1960, in what ways were they different from the "great migration" that occurred earlier in the century? In what ways were they similar? Does the reading material to which you have been exposed this semester give you any insight into the kinds of adjustments migrants were required to make in transitioning from the country to the city?

3. Marcus Garvey, one of whose heroes was Booker T. Washington, arrived in the United States in 1916 the year after Washington died, and attempted to practice a number of the latter's ideas as well as a number of his

own. Looking at those ideas, Garvey's proposals, plans and projects, and the character of U.S. society at the time, what can you say about the degree of fit between the two? Evaluate the responses of the black community and the government to the UNIA a particularly urban phenomenon. What do you suppose might have been the outcome had Garvey been able to realize the vision he articulated in his speeches and writings?

4. Both depression and war have a way of fundamentally altering social structures. Taking at least one of the events covered in this section, explicate that idea. You will want to keep in mind here that both processes make different demands on the society and the *populus* and that the consequences of those demands may be either temporary or permanent; that they may be local or far-reaching; and that they may be affected by what they people themselves do in responding new situations as they arise. How do you believe depression and war impacted the black communities? You might want to take say a small city and a large one, one from the North and one from the South, one from the East and one from the West, whatever to make your comparisons.

5. If there is one statement that could be said to describe Martin Luther King, Jr., it is that he devoted his life to a search for what he termed the "Beloved Community." The history of the United States suggests, however--irrespective of its political rhetoric to the contrary--that by design and execution, exclusion and exploitation are more important to the successful operation of the society than the vision articulated in that rhetoric. How does what you have learned this semester about black life in the city sustain, refute, or otherwise address this contention?

6. Organizations and institutions are created to perpetuate movements and realize certainty in an uncertain world. And while they are clearly social constructs, they have a realness about them that can both enhance and impede the acquisition of the purposes set forward to justify their appearance at specific historical moments. In what ways does a knowledge of the structure and activities of groups like the Negro Convention Movement of the nineteenth century, the Niagara Movement, the NAACP, SNCC, BPP, CORE, or any other black organization that came into being during the centuries of their sojourn in the United States serve as a vehicle for the liberation of black people?

7. In his book, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, Derrick Bell writes, "Racism is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of this society." As specifically as you can, detail the ways in which his observation illuminates the life experiences of black people in the city as explicated in this course. What function does this racism serve? Based on the information provided by this course, how do you believe the life experiences of black people might have taken shape without it?

8. In his "West India Emancipation" address delivered at Canadaigua, New York, 4 August 1857, Frederick Douglass observed speaking about the philosophy of reform, that the "whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims, have been born of

earnest struggle." That "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those who they oppress." In what ways, employing the information to which you have been exposed in this course, might you illuminate this observation for a being from another galaxy who you found standing at the foot of your bed as you awakened the morning after you graduated from college?

9. One writer has described history as "Humanity's rap sheet." I believe that it has a lot in common with Jazz—an improvisational medium—that is another particularly urban phenomenon. Reflecting on the content of this course, which of the above feels better for you and your understanding of the black urban experience? Is there another you would prefer? Be specific. Would you have it any other way? Explain.

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

There will be two measures of performance evaluation used in this course this term. Each is worth fifty (50) percent of your final grade.

A. Select any one question from Section IV of the Syllabus. In not less than five (5) or more than seven (7) pages, address the selected item as you would any term paper you have ever written. Cogency and coherence are the operative words here. **THIS ITEM IS DUE IN MY BOX IN KETCHUM 30G NOT LATER THAN 1600, FRIDAY, 25 FEBRUARY 2005.**

B. Select any other question as before and repeat the assignment. **THIS ITEM IS DUE IN MY BOX IN KETCHUM 30G NOT LATER THAN 1600, FRIDAY, 29 April 2005.**

NOTE WELL, LATE SUBMISSIONS REQUIRE LATE FEES. The late fee in this case is automatic reduction of the highest possible grade respecting the quality of your work by ONE FULL LETTER.

V. CRITERIA FOR THE EVALUATION OF WRITTEN WORK.

A. THE DAY MY EVALUATION OF YOUR WORK TAKES PRECEDENCE OVER THE PROCESSES OF ITS CREATION IN IMPORTANCE, YOU HAVE A PROBLEM. NOT ONLY IS GRADING NOT FAIR AND NOT OBJECTIVE, IT HAS VERY LITTLE TO DO WITH EDUCATION. PURELY AND SIMPLY, IT IS THE EXERCISE OF POWER THROUGH THE AUTHORITY OF THE TEACHER. ITS END IS PURPOSELY POLITICAL: TO LIMIT ACCESS TO A SMALLER AND MORE ELITE GROUP.

B. All work submitted must be an original copy. No reproductions (Xerox, mimeo, ditto, e.g.) will be accepted. Printer users: please remember to tear your sheets. Too, make sure you keep a copy of the work you submit--papers do get lost.

C. Since each of us has a different image of what a specific grade means, I offer herewith what the various letters mean for me.

1. "A." Demonstrates that you have mastered the subject and its supporting materials. A neat, solid tightly organized presentation wherein you make your case with authority.

2. "B." A solid work but unimaginative in character. Covers all the bases but rarely transcends them to express new insights or understandings.

3. "C." Competent. Follows the letter not the spirit of the assignment. Lacks substance, effort, care and concern.

4. "D." A weak and ineffectual presentation emblematic of a lick and promise approach to one's work. There is no evidence here of care, concern or commitment to crafting.

D. GRADES SHALL BE ASSIGNED ON THE BASIS OF HOW EFFECTIVELY YOU ADDRESS THE FOLLOWING CRITERIA ITEMS IN YOUR WORK.

1. Appropriate evidence of a thorough review of the pertinent literature for your work. This will be shown through the compilation of a significant bibliography, where warranted, addressing the major and minor aspects of your project. 15.

2. Demonstrated understanding of your project, its supporting materials, and its relations. This will be reflected in the thought, detail, and examination of issues (indicators of rigor, discipline and skill) that appear in your paper. In short, how completely you have developed the character of your presentation. 35.

3. Effective transmission of the meanings you have made of your labors. This will be reflected in the organization of the work (form) and the manner (style) with which they are communicated. To achieve maximum impact and effectiveness, purpose, direction, focus, proper distribution of emphases and evidence to support your contentions must be clear; coherence and credibility are important here. 35.

4. Errors in composition. These include: neatness of final copy, spelling, syntax, grammar, typing and verb/subject agreements. 15.