

# **CULTURE The Third Lecture 9/9**

## **Slide 1**

Time place holder

## **Slide 2**

This is our third lecture. The first was on color, arguing that the concept of race is a socially constructed fraudulent lie. We are all united in one human race.

The second lecture was on class, arguing that of the four main classes, the majority of Black people are in the working class. This makes class struggle a necessary framework for the Black liberation struggle

This third lecture is about culture. This is the main issue of identity, what distinguishes the quality of life that is special about being a descendant of Africa, particularly a people who have shared the trials, tribulations, and diversity of the American experience.

Culture is a major contributor to how people make meaning of their experience, how we feel and evaluate our environment and social relations.

The crisis for everyone is to learn how to know their culture and not be merely unmindful recipients of its gifts. Culture is a social product maintained and nourished by collectivity in social institutions. For any individual, it has to be learned by virtue of being part of the institutions and the social life of the community.

So, all Black people are not part of all Black culture. There is a diversity in the culture, sometimes generationally based, sometimes regionally based, and certainly class based.

At our last session on class a question was raised about the empirical study of culture. This is an important question.

The study of culture is based on documenting how Black people have performed culture, how they make it, learn it, enjoy it, etc. Good examples are when Katherine Dunham took pictures of people

dancing throughout the African Diaspora, or Roland Freeman's photography about Black fold culture throughout the deep south. Even the documentation of people like Zora Neale Hurston, or he people who captured the music for the Library of Congress or Folkways records.

The key is the sample, how much documentation is done to study some aspect of culture. Cast studies of a single case are important but need care when generalizing to a broader cultural pattern.

### **Slide 3**

This is our basic outline for today's session.

A definition

African origins

About everyday life

Historical development

Art

And then a summary comment

Note the images, a comb and cloth from Africa, the great musician/dancer James Brown and children producing cultural artifacts – all of this and more is part of culture

### **Slide 4**

OK, here is a general definition we can start with.

Culture is the ideas, customs, and social behavior of a particular group of people. It includes the attitudes of this group as well as their actions. Language is an example "element" of a culture.

Every human has these things, and in fact it is these things that make all of us human – of course at a biological level we are all animals, homo sapiens sapiens, but what makes us a member of a community of

people is culture. Some kind of culture is what defines each of us as social beings.

### **Slide 5**

There are two ways that culture manifests itself, as everyday life and as art.

- As everyday life, culture is the language we speak, and within the same language there are dialects. The food we eat, how it is prepared, the clothes we wear and how we wear them. Style matters. How we dance, how we laugh and what we think is beautiful. All of this we do every day. Styles and values of everyday life, including dialects, food production and preparation, clothing, dancing, morality, and aesthetics are included

On the other hand, this base foundation culture that includes everybody is the basis for the creative and disciplined production of art. Art is a concentration of the people's culture with the transformation of the artist's imaginative gifts of skill and emotional passion.

In this slide the image is by Aaron Douglas, an important early 20<sup>th</sup> century painter. Here he rejects the defeatist image of Black people as descendants of slaves, but projects a Black image before that as proud warriors celebrating in dance, affirming life.

### **Slide 6**

To be more specific, everyday culture has different aspects

One universal is recreation, the games we play, how we relax and have fun

Of course, there are the routines of life, the norms that form our habits, the values that guide our decision about right and wrong and what is beautiful (morality and aesthetics), reflecting style and customs

Rituals are special customs, often consisting of rule governed beliefs and actions, undertaken at specified times

Tradition is when these norms, customs and rituals are performed over time, passed on from generation to generation

This image is by the great Black painter Henry Ossawa Tanner, the first Black painter to win global praise based in Paris. Here he takes a musical experience common in every community and memorializes it in a famous painting, *The Banjo Lesson* (1893).

## **Slide 7**

Now when thinking of culture, or any other aspect of the Black experience one has to understand how things develop in the historical periods of the Black experience.

The process has two aspects

1. Modes of social cohesion – when there is the continuity between succeeding generations, one after the other. Africa (which of course over time has its own periods) slavery, rural tenancy. Urban industry, and something new coming into existence
2. Modes of social disruption – when there is a fundamental break between two generations requiring change in how life is lived under new conditions. The slave trade, the emancipations process (slave revolts, underground railroad, civil war, and reconstruction), great migrations, and the current transformation based on digital technology.

So, we begin with Africa for the origin of African American culture.

Remember, we are speaking of the modal cultural created and maintained by Black people, but this does not apply to all Black people. In each case it must be learned.

## **Slide 8**

We will look at six aspects of African cultural retention in everyday life: music, dance, food, language, hair and clothing. Remember this was only possible because of the structural segregation forced on Black

people, so under those conditions this retention and continuation was normal.

Lois Mailou Jones was a longtime professor of art at Howard University who delved deeply in using an African lens to view life. Her art is powerful as shown on this slide

### **Slide 9**

The most powerful gift from Africa is the drum, and its related rhythms.

Here is the Nigerian drummer Babatunde Olatunji. He founded the Olatunji Center for African Culture in Harlem. In the 1960s the center offered classes in African dance, music, language, folklore, and history for two dollars a class. A teacher training program was offered, and on Sundays there was the Roots of Africa concert series

Under him in the middle of the slide is the Cuban drummer Chano Pozo, who brought his magic to unite with Dizzy Gillespie in creating the great tune Manteca. He spoke no English, but the music enabled them to create together.

On top right is Max Roach and bottom right in Art Blakey, both great trap set drummers in the bebop tradition.

### **Slide 10**

And of course, connected to the music is how we move our bodies in dance.

African dance is often based on traditions that are like ritual movement that follow long held customs, within each culture such as those on this slide from the Yoruba of Nigeria and the Zulu of South Africa

The magic of African American dance is that many of the African movements are retained, but transformed within the milieu of captivity based on the genius of improvisation.

Check the brothers and sisters and the styles they employ

### **Slide 11**

And food. Everybody eats from what is available, but when people are moved from Africa to the Americas, they brought with them food practices and the tastes they loved.

Rice culture was brought from Africa to the Americas, especially South Carolina, by mainly African women whose skill created a great cash crop for the exporting of rice.

This food culture highly valued pork and chicken. The taste carried throughout the African diaspora has been pepper that makes food hot with flavor.

Most African American can look at this slide and see something familiar.

### **Slide 12**

African American food practices are a direct continuation from Africa, with the same improvisational genius that comes forth in music and dance.

It is called soul food because it represents a fundamental cultural foundation, the essence of a people's culture.

A tradition rooted in Jan 1<sup>st</sup>, being emancipation day based on the emancipation proclamation, Black people eat a traditional meal.

Some use June 19<sup>th</sup> as emancipation day, and eat a special meal then

Today, the tradition of eating black-eyed peas for the New Year has evolved into a number of variations and embellishments of the luck and prosperity theme including greens (collards, mustard or turnip greens, which varies regionally), the peas represent coins and the greens represent paper money.

### **Slide 13**

Of course you can't get more basic a cultural element than language, and within that language the dialect variation of a region and a class

Lorenzo Turner, anthropologist and linguist, traced the impact of African languages on the speech behavior of the Gullah people of the coastal area of the Carolinas. He corrected the ignorant racist view that Black people couldn't learn to speak English properly, while in fact they were improvising speech utilizing the interaction of their African origin with the language of their oppression. They were making sense to each other and not to their oppressors.

Geneva Smitherman takes the study into the urban ghetto and breaks down how Black English Vernacular BEV is maintained as a sense making tool for the Black community.

### **Slide 14**

At the foundation of all Black literature – novels, short stories or plays – is the common cultural practice of storytelling. Even when greeting someone and you say “What’s happening?” in that expression you are making an invitation for someone to tell you a story.

A main way that children learn is by listening to stories, and many stories become a tradition as they are the cultural stuff shared across the generations. This is the manifestation of morality, aesthetics, and general orientation for values of all kinds.

The most used form of African American writing is the autobiography, telling a stories about one's life

### **Slide 15**

When looking at a Black person, after noticing and reacting to their skin color, the next issue is the texture of their hair and how they style it.

Most Black people are aware of a hair problem, a hair crisis. The most basic problem is the 'Good Hair-Bad Hair" syndrome. The idea is that

one's biological make up is value laden as if there is a 'natural' hierarchy. "Good Hair" is a code for being hair linked to the genetic type of European people's hair while "Bad Hair" is the African type. This is racism pure and simple. The essence of racism is the dialectic of racial inferiority versus racial superiority-hence, good hair versus bad hair.

African Americans wear the hair of Africa proudly. They wear their crown.

### **Slide 16**

African hair is the stuff for head sculpture, for crown making, and for improvisational creativity.

If these images aren't a manifestation of beauty, then what is?

There is a continuity that connects hair culture throughout Africa and the African Diaspora.

### **Slide 17**

Every generation makes a hair statement as part of their cultural performance. People perform their politics in terms of styles of hair care.

Hair styles travel back and forth throughout the African Diaspora – in this country people look to Africa, while in Africa outside barber shops you see signs advertising hair styles of African Americans.

The extreme opposite, also a Black statement, is the negation of hair by wearing a bald head

### **Slide 18**

Black history can be traced through the combs we use.

1. The traditional African comb, a sculptured cultural artifact made out of wood
2. The industrial hot comb made of metal and accompanied with chemical hair straighteners



3. The Pan African comb brought forth during the Black Power movement used to power the “Afro” hair style
  4. The global comb found everywhere made of plastic
- But, does the brother on the slide even need a comb.

### **Slide 19**

Hair care has been driven by chemical tools that serve as great business. Symbolic of this who process has been the genius of Madame C J Walker. She used her wealth to promote the cultural creativity in all other areas.

Certain key women and some men have become wealthy in the hair care business.

### **Slide 20**

Black hair care is a thriving business today.

The industry is estimated to be valued at \$2.5 billion and 85% of African Americans report using hair care products specifically designed for their type of hair. Furthermore, Black consumers spend nine times more on haircare than other ethnic groups and sales in this sector have grown by 13% in 2020 alone.

The global hair extensions market, a major part of the black hair industry, is expected to be valued at \$2.8 billion by 2024

African American women spend an average of \$54.14 on hair care products monthly. In 2020, 36% of African American women in the United States preferred natural hair over chemically treated hair.

The number of African American-owned beauty supply stores increased by 75% between 2014 and 2019. The black hair care industry is projected to reach over \$6.9 billion by 2026.

### **Slide 21**

The role of hair care in Black culture is spoken to in an extensive scholarship about it.

This is one of the key ways that Black Studies scholarship about the Black experience continues to refute racism, promote the legitimacy of Black culture, and open up freedom as a new frontier.

I'll bet that everyone in this session today has a hair story that reflects cultural practices of family life. I can still remember the smell, the aroma, of kitchen hot comb hair care when the women would gather.

## **Slide 22**

Also clothing, what we wear and how we wear it.

We improvise in relation to two clothing trends

We take the national norm and impose a Black style on that, with most innovation coming from the masses of poor and working youth. Turn your cap backwards, that came from us. Take a brim hat and fix it ace-duce and block it real nice. Everybody buys the same hat, but it can be styled and turned into a culturally specific hat.

We retain an African aesthetic that get expressed in colors, bright colors that walk the rainbow, bold flavors and plaids and stripes, blending and clashing like nature itself.

People throughout the African Diaspora have a common look.

## **Slide 23**

Style is a cultural act, the expression of values and a way of being in the world.

In this slide on the left is the Modern Jazz Quartet sporting a Brooks Brothers look, taking the ivy look, and making it be black

On the right is Amiri Baraka and his posse turning traditional African attire into African American informal wear.

In both cases style reigns supreme

## **Slide 24**

Let's put this into its historical context.

The longest period of African American history has been under slavery.

Captivity was the context for transforming diverse Africans and their respective cultures and languages, into the African American nationality. African American nationality has within it a diversity from the Gullah people on the coast to the creole people of Louisiana. Black culture combines modal norms as a framework for improvisational diversity, as there is always room for individual creativity.

## **Slide 25**

One great cultural contribution that came out of the slave experience is the spiritual songs. The low moans and melodies of Black Christians revealed the soul of a new people, out of Africa and being reshaped by the pain of white racism and creative Black genius. The Fisk Jubilee singers popularized these songs all over the world. Three generations of music scholars led and provided scholarship about the Fisk Jubilee Singers, John Work, John Work II, and John Work III.

James Weldon Johnson wrote this poem in honor of the spirituals:

O black and unknown bards of long ago,  
How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?  
How, in your darkness, did you come to know  
The power and beauty of the minstrel's lyre?  
Who first from midst his bonds lifted his eyes?  
Who first from out the still watch, lone and long,  
Feeling the ancient faith of prophets rise  
Within his dark-kept soul, burst into song?

Heart of what slave poured out such melody  
As "Steal away to Jesus"? On its strains  
His spirit must have nightly floated free,  
Though still about his hands he felt his chains.  
Who heard great "Jordan roll"? Whose starward eye  
Saw chariot "swing low"? And who was he

That breathed that comforting, melodic sigh,  
"Nobody knows de trouble I see"?

## **Slide 26**

After the emancipation via the civil war and reconstruction, the Sunday music of the spiritual was joined by the Saturday night music of the blues.

The blues is a musical form that developed as the technology of instrumentation developed. The guitar was universal followed by piano, bass and drums, tambourine, and then those that breathed sound.

The blues is philosophical poetry set to music, it is a window into the lived experience, living in a post slavery plantation economy

John Lee H "The blues is a feeling, you can't get it out of no book. You can't write the blues on a piece of paper, you just feel the blues."

Muddy Waters said "Saturday night is your big night. Everybody used to fry up fish and have one hell of a time. Find me playing till sunrise for 50 cents and a sandwich. And be glad of it. And they really liked the low-down blues."

Buddy Guy said "Listen to the lyrics - we're singing about everyday life... rich people trying to keep money, poor people trying to get it, and everyone having trouble with their husband or wife!"

## **Slide 27**

This was a time for the national identity of the African descendant people in the US. So we need a definition of a nation

A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.

By the Civil War Black people met all of these conditions.

The red black, and green colors on this slide are symbolic of the African American nation, but also connect this nation to Africa and the African Diaspora

Red: the blood that unites all people of Black African ancestry, and shed for liberation; Black: for the people whose existence as a nation, though not a nation-state, is affirmed by the existence of the flag; Green: the abundant and vibrant natural wealth of Africa, the Motherland

Black people use these colors as an affirmation of identity

### **Slide 28**

The next major cultural innovation in the music was the joyful noise of emancipation that stood on the happy blues in creating gospel music.

The church was the fundamental indigenous institution of the Black community, with music as the cultural basis for emotional and psychological unity of the Black community

In this slide on the top right is Thomas Dorsey, a great creator of Gospel from Pilgrim Baptist Church in Chicago, writing original music every Sunday for his main soloist Mahalia Jackson.

Also out of Chicago is the great family singing group the Stapel Singers, a favorite of Martin Luther King. Pop Staples said if Martin can preach it we can sing it during the 1960s.

### **Slide 29**

The urban innovation in the music was what has been called jazz. More recently musicians have been calling it Black classical music.

This represents the professionalization of musical performance. The full range of instruments were embraced. It became necessary to have technical excellence, a mastery of improvisational creativity, and command of a standard set of tunes to be played on any scale the leader would call out.

This cultural process was based in the Black community, and developed through apprenticeship. Bands served as schools and people learned on the job.

This slide features Duke Ellington, a singular genius who maintained leadership of a band for over 40 years, with many musicians as

mainstays for 20 to 30 years. He wrote thousands of tunes including such standards as “Sophisticated Landy” and “In A Sentimental Mood” and “Caravan”

### **Slide 30**

One of the most important aspects of the history of art in the Black community is generational movements. People in all the arts interacting and developing common aesthetics and points of view in what they do and how they relate to the Black community.

One important movement was the Harlem Renaissance.

This is the Black counterpart to the “Roaring 20’s” as Black people were expressing a breakout cultural impulse. These were bold and exciting times. The activists were called “New Negroes,” with a militant attitude and freedom on their mind. Harlem was the capital of Black political culture in the US during this period.

The man in the middle is Alain Locke, the first Black Rhodes scholar, professor of philosophy at Howard University who edited the journal on the left that defined the main content of the Harlem Renaissance.

The weakness of his collection is that he excluded the left, especially the man on the right, Hubert Harrison,

Harrison was described by activist A Philip Randolph as "the father of Harlem radicalism" and by the historian J. A. Rogers as "the foremost Afro-American intellect of his time." John Jackson described him as "The Black Socrates".

### **Slide 31**

One of the great Black writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is Langston Hughes.

He wrote in every literary genre, known for his novels, poetry, essays, and journalism.

Hughes said that this poem was written in about "ten or fifteen minutes" on "the back of an envelope" he had when he was seventeen and crossing the Mississippi River on the way to visit his father in Mexico.

- I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

### **Slide 32**

Another iconic poem was by Claude McKay, a leftwing writer from Jamaica who became part of the Harlem scene

- If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursed lot.  
If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
O kinsmen we must meet the common foe!  
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!  
What though before us lies the open grave?

Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

### **Slide 33**

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s was followed by the Chicago Renaissance of the 1940s.

The Harlem Renaissance was a celebration of the middle class, while the Chicago Renaissance of the 1940's was a celebration of the working class.

Wright wrote: "...the Negro writer must create in his readers' minds a relationship between a Negro woman hoeing cotton in the South and the men who toil in swivel chairs in Wall Street and take the fruits of her toil."

He summed his view this way: Today the question is, Shall Negro writing be for the lives and consciousness of the Negro masses, moulding those lives and consciousness toward new goals, or shall it continue begging the question of the Negroes' humanity?

### **Slide 34**

Within the jazz, Black classical music context, a new revolutionary leap took place with the development of Be-bop

It moved the music scene from popular dancing, to a music that stood alone, an intellectual music that ranked with the global standards of harmonic complexity, technical excellence, coupled with the fundamental Black dialectic of improvisation.

In this slide we feature the great Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, along with Thelonious Monk on the cover of Time Magazine

Charlie Parker explained his approach to bebop: I'd been getting bored with the stereotyped changes (harmonies) that were being used all the time. I found that by using the higher intervals of a chord as a melody line and backing them with appropriately related changes I could play the thing I'd been hearing. I came alive.



Monk said “If you really understand the meaning of be bop, you understand the meaning of freedom”

### **Slide 35**

Charlie Parker was called “bird.” The reason seemed to be his voracious appetite for fried chicken, which he called “yardbird.” Charlie's bandmates started calling him “Yardbird,” and eventually shortened it to “Bird.”

He was the master of his generation and every musician, no matter the instrument, learned from him.

The master singer of this generation was Billy Holiday, referred to as “Lady Day.” She made a great impact on popular consciousness with her song “Strange Fruit” – a confrontation with lynching

Southern trees bear strange fruit  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root  
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant south  
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouths  
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh  
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck  
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck  
For the sun to rut, for the trees to drop  
Here is a strange and bitter crop

### **Slide 36**

The next major art movement was the 1960s Black Arts Movement. The Black arts movement was the cultural arm of the Black Power movement. This was a time of great pro-Black militancy

Jeff Donaldson a Chicago painter from Arkansas who became dean at Howard University said this: "We wanted to try to establish an aesthetic that reflected our heritage as people of African descent in the United States, an aesthetic that also reflected social responsibility and technical excellence."

The poet essayist dramatist Amiri Baraka hit harder when he said:

“Since the rich eat more/ than anybody else/ It is reasonable to assume/ that they are more full of shit.”

This is the great Wall of Respect on 43<sup>rd</sup> Street in Chicago that began the mural movement in 1967, and the painting is by Jeff, “The Wives of Shango”

### **Slide 37**

The Black Arts Movement was production in all ways including creating journals for all art genre.

Another great poet theorist of the movement was Larry Neal. He stated this: “The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. This movement is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America.”

### **Slide 38**

Here are only four of the great poets of the Black arts movement: Amos Mor (Chicago), Amiri Baraka (Newark), Sonja Sanchez (Harlem), and Jayne Cortez (West Coast).

### **Slide 39**

The next musical innovation was led by the great John Coltrane. Here is what Amiri Baraka has to say about Trane:

“Trane carried the deepness in us thru Bird and Diz, and them, back to us. He reclaimed the Bob fire, the Africa, Polyrhythmic, Improvisational, Blue, Spirituality of us. The starter of one thing yet the anchor of something before.

Trane, carrying Bird-Diz bop revolution, and its opposing force to the death force of slavery and corporate co-optation, went through his various changes, in life, in music. He carried the southern Black church music, and blues and rhythm and blues, as way stations of his personal development, not just theory or abstract history. He played all these musics, and was all these persons.

#### **Slide 40**

Hip Hop emerged as the next major cultural movement after the 1960's –conscious victims of the American dream, especially its musical form of rap

Two major tendencies developed – socially conscious hip hop is what started it and continues as close to the grass roots cauldron of creativity - but Rap has been co-opted into a gangster abomination that brings terror and grief to the community while sporting a ghetto fabulous cover for its misdeeds. This is driven by giant culture corporations

To some extent Tupac Shakur represented both tendencies.

The duo of Dear Prez is an example of connecting rap to the fight for Black liberation.

#### **Slide 41**

The trap of the capitalist matrix is faced on a global level. A big example is carnival whether it is in Brazil, Trinidad, or London or closer to home in Brooklyn or New Orleans.

The carnival festival was originally a slave ritual protest, an expression of freedom

Now Mardi Gras and Carnival is controlled by city governments, police, and financial interests. Is hip hop any different?

The fight is to free our culture and return it to the central global theme of Black culture, freedom, to bring the freedom heartbeat into the soul of our people

## **Slide 42**

One great battleground is our cultural institutions. The crisis is captured in this question – is Black cultural autonomy possible in capitalist America?

In trying to emulate the structures of the mainstream the crisis is always funding. So we have to keep asking the question since who pays the piper calls the tune. The question - is Black cultural autonomy possible in capitalist America?

The answer has to be yes and no.

The yes is based on the capacity of people to practice self-reliance, the stuff that fuels self-determination. The challenge goes further in that this must reach out to the very best our people can create.

This brings us to the no. The ruling practice of capital is that it can buy the best among Black people, it can throw financial resources at people and buy them out.

Black autonomy tied to freedom is necessarily anti-capitalist. And as we demonstrated in an earlier lecture, the majority of Black people are against capitalism and pro socialist.

The cultural battle must become center stage.

## **Slide 43**

So, we have covered allot, but in general terms we can make these summary statements

1. Culture is what makes us part of a human community
  2. The origin of Black culture is Africa
  3. Fundamentals of culture are in everyday life
  4. Culture goes through historical changes
  5. Art is the highest form of cultural production
- And remember, Black is beautiful!