

## **AFRICAN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY**

### **Sample syllabus -- mid-level undergraduate class**

**Instructor:** Dr. Colin Smith (he/him)

**Course description:** Philosophy entails studying the nature and meaning of existence, including key questions concerning human subjectivity, freedom, and how we should improve our lives and society. In this course, we will consider what is distinctive in the African American experience and the lessons for philosophy from the Black intellectual tradition. In this survey course, we will consider a wide range of voices spanning almost two hundred years, but with the goal of tracing philosophical threads that can inform and improve our thinking today.

The course is divided into four sections: (1) Personhood, (2) Liberation, (3) Critique, and (4) Justice. Our aim throughout will be to pose and do our best to answer questions like: What does it mean to determine one's life for oneself? What exactly is oppression, and what harms does it bring? How can we free ourselves from forces of oppression? How does answering these questions necessitate our challenging and criticizing traditions of Western thinking and the power imbalances that they yield? In what ways do our answers to these questions grant further insight into such issues as gender, immigration, theology, and climate change? No background in philosophy will be presupposed.

**Learning goals:** The course is intended to promote critical writing, speaking, and thinking skills broadly while developing the student's analytic understanding of the history, art, and experiences of post-diasporic African peoples and their descendants. Class discussions will be partially student-led, and students will be graded both on preparation and their spontaneous contributions demonstrating genuine insight.

**Required textbook:** None; readings and video viewings will be provided on Canvas.

**Grading:**

15%: Attendance and participation, including prepared discussions

5%: Discussion leading (two per semester)

25%: Final research project

20%: Exam 1

20%: Exam 2

15%: Podcast assignment

**Schedule of classes:**

**Introduction**

Week 1: Introduction

Syllabus, introduction to philosophy (lecture)

Watch: *Race, The Power of an Illusion*, Episode 1, "The Difference Between Us" (2003)

## **Unit 1: Personhood**

### Week 2: The history of personhood in the US 1

David Walker, the *Appeal* (excerpts, 1830)

Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I a Woman?" (1851)

Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" (1852)

### Week 3: Historical personhood 2

Angela Davis, "The Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" (1972)

W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Chapter 1, "Of Our Spiritual Striving" (1903)

Lewis Gordon, "The Problem of Biography in Africana Thought" (2000)

### Week 4: Theories of personhood

Naomi Zack, "Race, Life, Death, Identity, Tragedy, and Good Faith" (1996)

Lewis Gordon, "What Does it Mean to be a Problem?" (1995)

Paget Henry, "Commodification and Existence in African American Communities" (2001)

## **Unit 2: Liberation**

### Week 5: Struggle

bell hooks, "Learning in the Shadow of Race and Class" (1992)

bell hooks, "Racism and Feminism" (1982)

Angela Davis, "Recognizing Racism in the Era of Neoliberalism" (2013)

### Week 6: Liberation 1

Frederick Douglass, "The Fight with Covey" (c. 1845)

Ida B. Wells, "The Red Record" (Chapters 7 and 10, 1895)

Audre Lorde, "The Use of Anger" (1981)

### Week 7: Liberation 2

Marcus Garvey, "Address to the Second UNIA Convention" (1921)

W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Chapter 2, "Of the Dawn of Freedom" (1903)

W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Chapter 4, "The Meaning of Progress" (1903)

### Week 8: Liberation 3

Martin Luther King, Jr., "Nonviolence and Racial Justice" (1958)

El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (a.k.a. Malcolm X), "The Ballot or the Bullet" (1964)

William Jones, "Ethical Perspectives on Black Theology: Mao, Martin, and Malcolm" (1982)

## **Unit 3: Critique**

### Week 9: The critique of Western reason

Tommy Curry, "Back to the Woodshop" (2015)

Jennifer Vest, "The Promise of Caribbean Philosophy" (2005)

Watch: Cornel West, "Liberation Theology as Critique" (2004)

### Week 10: Race and critical philosophies

Rocio Zambrana, "Hegel, History, and Race" (2018)

Ladelle McWhorter, "From Scientific Racism to Neoliberal Biopolitics: Using Foucault's Toolkit" (2018)

Lewis Gordon, "Phenomenology and Race" (2018)

Week 11: Black Lives Matter as critique

David E. McClean, "Black Lives What? On Slogans, Flash Movements, and the Pursuit of Real Black Power" (2015)

Watch: Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, "An Interview with the Founders of Black Lives Matter" (2018)

Watch: Trisha Rose, "Black Feminism, Popular Culture, and Respectability Politics" (2016)

#### **Unit 4: Justice**

Week 12: Criminal justice 1: policing

Vanessa Wills, "Bad Guys and Dirty Hands: 'Ethical Policing' in the Face of Racial Injustice" (2016)

George Yancy, "The Violent Weight of Whiteness: The Existential and Psychic Price Paid by Black Male Bodies" (2017)

Week 13: Criminal justice 2: prisons

Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (Chapters 1 and 6, 2003)

Naomi Zack, "Ideal, Nonideal, and Empirical Theories of Social Justice: The Need for Applicative Justice in Addressing Injustice" (2018)

Watch: *The Thirteenth* (2016)

Week 14: Race and climate justice

Olúfẹ̀mi O. Táíwò, "Cops, Climate, Covid: Why There Is Only One Crisis" (2020)

Olúfẹ̀mi O. Táíwò, "Climate Apartheid Is the Coming Police Violence Crisis" (2020)

Olúfẹ̀mi O. Táíwò, "Why Reparations Cannot Ignore Climate Change" (2022)

Week 15: Course conclusion

No assignment -- catch up, final presentations on final projects