

# Universidad Sin Fronteras Class, March 20, 2013

First Class in the Course on Introduction to Culture and Liberation in the U. S. South

## CONTEXTUALIZING THE BLUES TRADITION:

AFRICAN CULTURAL RESISTANCE TO TRANSATLANTIC ENSLAVEMENT, 1600-1850

### I. INTRODUCTIONS

James Braggs and Emery Wright from Project South:

- . Welcome to the third semester and the third course of the Universidad Sin Fronteras at the Atlanta Campus. We'll be meeting from 6-8 for four more Wednesdays, with different faculty leaders each week.
- . There will also be Liberation Spring Semester courses in Puerto Rico, San Antonio, and Detroit.
- . Ours is a university operating by and for the Movement. Our reflections are the life blood of the course, bringing out the knowledge in the room and inspiring us through the histories of those who struggled for freedom.
- . It is appropriate that a course centering around the blues in southern history, we are meeting at Pal's Lounge, a Sweet Auburn site where those struggling for liberation have heard the blues for many decades. Our host is its fourth generation owner, Devon Lee.  
(<http://cargocollective.com/palslounge#History>)
- . This first class will be led by Seth Markle, a long-time organizer in the United States, the South, the Hip-Hop community, and East Africa. He will help us build the trans-Atlantic relationships.

Seth Markle, Guest Faculty/Lead Facilitator:

- . Thanks for welcoming me. I am a New York University graduate currently teaching African History at Trinity College in Connecticut.
- . I had to decide what my rule would be to avoid lecturing about authoritative knowledge. The format should allow sharing in large and small groups. Everyone needs to participate, respect each other's points of view, and recognize when it's time for someone else to talk.
- . To understand the Blues as a source for resistance, we need to talk about Africa.
- . The music played before we began is from Mali but is currently not allowed in Mali.

Round-Robin Responses in Reaction to a quotation by Amilcar Cabral, African revolutionary leader from Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau (See handout.): In what ways has imperialist domination in our present-day attempted at eradicating (directly or indirectly) the core cultural elements of the oppressed people in the U. S. South?

- . Power as the root of separating people from each other through segregations and making it seem that some people are better than others.

- . Economic disparity.
- . Arizona's ban on ethnic studies.
- . In this historic building for the blues, we can remember the words of blues songs about how oppressors brainwashed us, made us forget what our ancestors held as their support and defense structure, suppressed and erased our consciousness for a long time and still today.
- . English only restrictions. Respect and rights only for Christianity.
- . Definitions of acceptable business attire and looks, which do not allow ethnic dress and looks.
- . Labeling black southerners minorities, even when they have been majorities in some areas.
- . Stripping black people of our names, identities, and cultures in slavery but also today.
- . Changes in how people adjust to oppression have damaged their relationships with each other.
- . Mainstream culture praises music for how popular (and profitable) it is rather than for its message or its use as a means of creation and expression.
- . It can be difficult to distribute and gain access to music, films, etc. with liberation messages.
- . Images of southern people of color on television and in other media have brainwashed us into accepting stereotypes, including thinking of some hair as "bad."
- . Tyler Perry missed a big opportunity when he chose to depict black characters as he has.
- . Converting to Islam was a big day for me. An imam recently spoke about people not valuing marriage anymore; I have more friends who have fathers than those who don't.
- . People with power have claimed ownership of things they took from us, including through the Trail of Tears and erasing entire peoples.
- . Recap of the different aspects mentioned: Social forces such as schools, the media industry, and other institutions have eradicated key elements of culture, such as family, music, economics, style, names, clothing, how you represent yourself, identity.

## II. CHALLENGING THE DOMINANT NARRATIVE OF SLAVERY IN THE AMERICAS

Small Groups Sharing: What do you remember about what you were taught about slavery in school?

- . In 2012, a third-grade teacher in suburban Atlanta asked students these questions: "Each tree has 56 oranges. If eight slaves pick them equally, then how much would each slave pick?" "If Frederick got two beatings each day, how many beatings did he get in one week?"
- . Watching the television program "Roots."
- . So much missing, so many silences, including nothing about how the slaves came from Africa.

- . Nonsensical memorization of disjointed specifics out of context that never fit together to tell a story, leaving us with no true understanding of events like the 3/5 Compromise. Emphasizing white abolitionists like Harriet Beecher Stowe when teaching the Underground Railroad.
- . Faceless images with no obvious culture or humanity, leaving me with no sense of what slaves actually looked like.
- . In the fourth grade, a white female teacher organized a "game" that required the students to pretend they were having to survive the Underground Railroad as they went from classroom to classroom, stimulating so much fear and trauma that parents complained.
- . Small portions of the history of slavery coming to light recently: the Triangular Trade; slavery as a cause of the Civil War; more on slave masters rather than on resistance against them.
- . Slavery has been taught differently in different areas of the world.
- . Schools gave the institution of slavery a mythological brevity rather than acknowledging how many centuries it actually lasted and also made it seem that it ended more sharply than it did.
- . Schools sometimes put one black teacher in charge of black history. In one class, only black students were asked to create a rap song about history.
- . Some of us have learned direct history about members of our family in slavery, with Native American ancestors having been enslaved before African ancestors.
- . Enslaved people had to carry ivory to the coast so it could be used for piano keys.
- . Seth's summation: The historical narrative we've been fed in schools: only black enslaved, not Native Americans or whites; resistance happened only from exceptional people like Tubman; the end of slavery was because of a white and black emancipation movement; stereotype of the happy slave/docile slave because of fear or natural African characteristics.

### III. THE BASICS OF SLAVERY

#### Lessons in a Time Line of Slave Revolts That Challenge the Myths:

- . Resistance occurred from the beginning, including on the coast of Africa and on the ships.
- . The area that became the United States was not the central area for revolts.
- . There were slaves in New York.
- . There was at least one revolt every decade; they were continued and constant.
- . Slave owners and traders knew that resistance would always happen and had to be controlled.
- . We have learned more about individual slaves running away than about collective resistance.

Lessons in the Maps and Charts of Numbers of the Slave Trade (maps available on the Internet):

- . The main source of captives being sent into slavery were from Congo and Angola, not, as is often assumed, from the part of West Africa north of them. Certain African ports were central for slave trade from Africa, with the busiest being in West Central Africa.
- . Brazilians bought the most Africans; the smallest number started out in the United States, although many went there after having been on Caribbean islands.
- . George W. Bush showed his ignorance of history when he was surprised about how many black people he saw in Brazil.
- . There was also a slave trade going north and east of Africa.
- . Slavery covered all the continents because slave owners conquered so much of them.
- . Africans were victims of geography since the slave trade began in the Mediterranean and then spread south when the struggle between Muslims and Christians forced the Portuguese to seek another route to the wealth of the Indian Ocean area; they began to become more involved in Africa once they saw gold in West Africa.
- . The numbers of the slave trade varied according to different stages, with the most being sent west from 1701 to 1810. Even after the overseas slave trade officially ended, it continued until 1870.
- . The people who were enslaved came from many different African cultures, spoke thousands of languages, had different belief systems, came from societies of sizes ranging from villages to centralized kingdoms. They identified as being from Muslim, Hausa, Christian, and many other cultures, rather than as being African. How could cultural resistance arise from such diversity?
- . The Middle Passage transformed cultural identity into racial identity.
- . African Americans were part of a larger history.
- . The data charts about numbers are estimates based on evidence on slaves sent to and from different areas in each period.
- . Depending on the scholar, the estimates for how many people were captured to be sold as slaves range from eleven to fifty million. Almost two million died along the way to their destination. .
- . The numbers suggest that we should call what happened war and genocide rather than enslavement and trade.
- . Bight of Benin was unusual because it developed a slave trade later than the other areas.
- . The numbers increased over time because of the desire for labor in new economies (sugar, rice, tobacco, coffee, cotton) and the problem of deaths from diseases and resistance.
- . Racism became more of an ideology tied to capitalism

#### IV: THE CONTOURS OF RESISTANCE

Reactions to Images of Violence against and Resistance by Enslaved People:

- . Torture and punishment included whips, metal contraptions, being buried up to their necks, having hot liquid poured over them.
- . Repression became more brutal in reaction to any increase in resistance.
- . What do images of torture convey today about how we see ourselves? The fact that so many resisted knowing what would happen when they were caught shows the lie of the happy slave.
- . Resistance continued because new Africans kept coming with a memory of freedom. The contradiction of slavery for "owners" was the need to control but also the need to bring more people, even though they had known freedom and had cultural knowledge useful for resistance.
- . Escaped enslaved Africans set up communities in the mountains, swamps, and forests, especially in Brazil and Jamaica. They included Africans from varied cultures. Seminoles in Florida included a mixture of Africans [and some indigenous Creeks and other Native Americans]. These communities were called maroons in North America and palenques in Mexico. The Spanish, British, and French had to negotiate with them.
- . The cultures of origin of enslaved Africans held varied cultural beliefs: some believed in one God and some believed in more; some were Christian and some Muslim; some had chiefs and priests.

#### IV. THE CONTOURS OF RESISTANCE

What elements of surviving African culture are shown in the representation of a Caribbean maroon community planning rebellion in the movie "Sankofa," which was based on what scholars know about such communities?

- . The counting of the children and the tools/potential weapons might reflect the symbolism of certain numbers for them, such as clapping four times (a Yoruba practice) or speaking of seventeen children.
- . While in the hills, they were serving their god.
- . It takes a combination of people to resist but requires determining who can be trusted.
- . The cultural consistency of elder leadership, including female leaders.
- . African cultural dress and hair.
- . African and Creole languages.
- . The importance of families and villages with a collective sense of pride in both boys and girls, showing the significance of children in extended families.
- . Wearing red, signifying a god of protection, the god of war (Shango).
- . Drumming and people in a circle as cultural elements.

Reactions to a passage from Black Jacobins by C. R. L. James (see Handout)

- . He relates the Creole prayer made by a voodoo priest to encourage a group of maroons five days before the 1791 rebellion in Santo Domingo/Haiti

in 1791. The prayer states that their god will banish the god of whites who made them suffer and calls on them to listen to the voice of freedom that speaks in each of their hearts.

- . C. R. L. James learned the specific wording of the prayer from oral histories
- . The priest was telling them the maroons that since their god ordered them to revenge their wrongs, it was their religious duty to resist.
- . There was Christianity in Africa even before colonialism; enslaved people believed in different gods, those of the Africans and those of the white man who did evil to their people.
- . They believed that gods can do good or bad, can harm or protect.
- . Before people take action, they must call on their ancestors (as when honoring them by pouring libations and saying "Ase") so the ancestors they venerate will protect them.

#### V. SOUND EFFECT: PERFORMING CULTURAL RESISTANCE TO AFRICAN ENSLAVEMENT

- . After the prayer, a priestess sang a song translated as "We swear to destroy the whites and all that they possess; let us die rather than fail to keep this vow." (See Handout.)
- . They sang and danced to prepare for revolt and to reclaim their humanity.
- . We shall do an improvised performance, using the song. Be expressive, spontaneous, and creative. One person will start in any way and we will build to a collective whole.
- . It took a while, but harmony and unity developed, a way to join to topple the slave system.

#### VI: CONCLUDING REFLECTION PAPER

what is your preferred medium of cultural expression (i.e., language, food, clothing style, religion, music, poetry, family) that can serve as a tool for collective resistance to present-day forms of oppression? Please explain.

Next class will be on the blues and its history as part of cultural resistance.

This summation of the main points made at the first class of the Course on Culture and Liberation in the U. S. South on March 20, 2013 is selective, to some extent organized by topic rather than in the order in which they were stated, and often paraphrased. I encourage anyone who was present to suggest additions or corrections.