IDIM: Art As Oppositional Discourse

Artistic Practice as Political Discourse: African American art and its impact on the political climate of the United States of America; 1900 – Present.

- **Art** (art) *n.* 1 human creativity 2 skill 3 any specific skill or its application 4 any craft or its principles 5 creative work or its principles 6 any branch of creative work, as painting or sculpture 7 products of this, as paintings or statues

- **Discourse** (diserts’) *n.* 1 talk; conversation 2 a formal treatment of a subject, in speech or writing

**Objective**

To explore popular culture, African American art and history, and discursive/oppositional art, in order to understand the ways in which art, particularly African-American art, has influenced the political and social climates of the United States. These influences are great in number, therefore I will focus my research particularly, but not exclusively, on the 20th century.

My coursework will peruse the following questions:

- What is art? What is great art? According to whom? Why is art so powerful? What aesthetics are/were being used to judge art? In what ways did/does African American art defy these aesthetics?

- How does art create discourse within a society?

- What is the definition of African American art?

- What are the various purposes of African American art, and how have these objectives changed from decade to decade in the last century?

- How have politics influenced the messages that African Americans have sent to one another through art? Furthermore, how has African American art influenced the political messages sent to and from the power structure?

- In what ways did the portrayals of African Americans in mass media (television, top 40 radio, movies, etc.) and advertisement affect the perceptions that African Americans had of themselves and, subsequently, their art? What about today? What about white perceptions?

- In what ways did/does African American art serve white America? What has been its influence on prevailing ideas of racism and inferiority toward African Americans?
What is African American art saying today? What is the legacy of yesterday’s art? Which battles have been won, and which are still being fought through art?

**Background**

African American art is many things. It is powerful in its depth and truth. It stirs the soul and stimulates the mind. It is accessible, complex, and functional. African American art motivates the soul for revolution. It provides sustenance for the spirit. It celebrates the culture which, to so many, remains a mystery. African American art is an expression of all that is beautiful, painful, frustrating, ugly, joyous, humorous, ironic, and bitter in African American life. It predicts the future while celebrating a common past. In his discussion of African American literature, Lance Jeffers describes African American art in this way:

> Afro-American literature is a statement against death, a statement as to what life should be: life should be vivacious, exuberant, wholesomely uninhibited, sensual, sensuous, constructively antirespectable, life should abound and flourish and laugh, life should be passionately lived and man should be loving; life should be not a sedate waltz or foxtrot but a vigorous Boogaloo...Black literature in American is, then, a setting-forth of man’s identity and destiny; an investigation of man’s iniquity and a statement of belief in his potential godliness; a prodding of man toward exploring and finding joy in his humanity (New Black Voices, 506).

Here we see that the function of Black art is not merely to decorate a wall, nor to be mindlessly regurgitated by those who aspire to be “cultured.” Black art is a way of life. In a poem entitled “Black Art,” LeRoi Jones (later Imamu Amiri Baraka) expands on this idea by emphasizing the responsibility of African American art; poetry in particular.

Poems are bullshit unless they are teeth or trees or lemons piled on a step. Or black ladies dying of men leaving nickel hearts beating them down. Fuck poems and they are useful, they shoot come at you, love what you are, breathe like wrestlers, or shudder strangely after pissing. We want live words of the hip world live flesh & coursing blood. Hearts Brains Souls splintering fire... Poems scream poison gas on the beasts in green berets Clean out the world for virtue and love, Let there be no love poems written until love can exist freely and cleanly. Let Black People understand that they are the lovers and the sons of lovers and warriors and sons of lovers and warriors and sons of warriors Are Poems & poets & all the loveliness here in the world.

We want a black poem. And a Black World, Let the World be a Black Poem And Let All Black People Speak This Poem
Here, Jones/Baraka clearly assaults poetry which is created simply for admiration. He calls for art to challenge, disturb, and educate the people. These are prevalent objectives of African American art.

African American art has greatly served the African American community. It has raised social and political consciousness among the people. Yet, it has also served greater America; revealing injustices, defying stereotypes, unveiling mysteries. From Langston Hughes to James Brown; Lorainne Hansberry to Amiri Baraka; James Van Der Zee to Alvin Ailey. By taking on political topics as their themes and exposing the transgressions of this country, African American artists (professional and non-professional) have mad a tremendous impact on the political and social climate of this country.

Proposal

In the last century, African American portrayals in American mass media have become increasingly popular. However, the messages being produced, the means of transmission, the audience, and the objectives of these portrayals, have all varied according to the political climate of the era in which they were generated. By studying the history of mass media, popular culture and advertising, I hope to track the progression of ideologies and political climates concerning African Americans over the past century. Thus determining the ways in which African Americans were viewed by the majority culture at large. Classes which will foster exploration in this arena of study include:

_Jour 3741 – Racial Minorities and the Mass Media_

This course examines people of color in the U.S. as producers, subjects, and consumers of mass media. It discusses the ways in which these representations have evolved, and the cultural ramifications of these representations on American society at large.

_Jour 3745 – Mass Media and Popular Culture_

An evaluation of Mass Media's role in the formation of popular culture and cultural discourse. Focuses on issues of mass media representations of ethnicity, religion, social status, and gender.

_Jour 5274 – Advertising in Society_
A discussion of advertising which includes history, ethics, and criticism. Specific topics of study include the historical evolution of gender and ethnic representations in advertising.

**AmSt 3113 – American Cultural Diversity**

This course focuses on the ways in which the works of selected writers, filmmakers, and popular artists can impact the perceptions of the masses. Emphasis is placed on black and white cultures during the last century.

The aforementioned courses will serve as a foundation; a point of departure. They will assist me in demonstrating the majority culture’s perceptions of African Americans during the last century. It is against this backdrop that I plan to compare the artistic works and expressions of African Americans. Through this comparison, I plan to demonstrate that, while mainstream society was ridiculing and dehumanizing the African American, s/he was developing an art form which would eventually educate, uplift and empower “the” community. These art forms were unmistakably political and began to prepare the African American masses for the fight toward equality. The following courses investigate these issues.

**Spelman College – African Diaspora and the World**

A two semester course which seeks to examine the major themes associated with the African diaspora within a global context and from perspectives that are both interdisciplinary and gender informed. Topics included the varying responses to the condition of servitude; periods of cultural efflorescence such as the Harlem Renaissance and the negritude movement; and a comparative assessment of post emancipation societies.

**New York University – Reference and Research in Jazz**

An exploration of the development of jazz; its origins, dispersion, exploitation, and purpose in a socio-historical context.

**GC 1816 – African American Literature**

African American autobiography, fiction, essay, poetry, and drama of the 20th century.

**AfrH 3586 – African American (visual) Artists on Film**

This course explores some of the major African American visual artists of the 20th century. Specific art works are discussed, as well as the cultural/historical/societal context in which the works were created.

**Afro 3301 – The Music of Black Americans**

The historical development of African American music, including the spiritual, gospel, blues, soul, jazz, and classical. Discusses the impact of social conditions on the creation and context of African American music.

**Afro 5181 – Contemporary Black Theatre: 1960-Present**
A discussion of the essays, playwrights, and theaters that have contributed significantly to contemporary African American theater. Also explores the socio-historical context out of which these plays were created, and the African American playwrights’ significant involvements in the creation of a diversified American theatrical tradition.

Afro 5597 – Harlem Renaissance: Afro-American Art and Culture in the 1920s
A multidisciplinary review of the Jazz Age’s Harlem Renaissance: literature, popular culture, visual arts, and political journalism.

Afro 5598 – Seminar: The Black Arts Renaissance, 1960s and 1970s
Multidisciplinary perspectives on the 1960s and 1970s post-Civil Rights and Black Power Era of African American art and politics (literature, popular culture, visual arts, political journalism).

Through these courses I will demonstrate the strength and impact of African American art on African Americans. However, the power of this art was not constrained within the boarders of the African American community. I contend that African American art has initiated discourse within society at large; perpetuating ideas, and altering the mindsets of many different types of Americans. The following courses, which discuss the general powers and properties of art, will assist me in the development of these ideas.

CSCL 3172 – Music as Discourse
Key themes in this course include: what is music; the difference between music and noise; music as a discursive practice; music in the construction of consciousness, identity and sociality; the censorship of music; and the political implications music possesses.

CSCL 3176 – Oppositional Cinema
An exploration of Black American Cinema as it exists both parallel to, and in tension with, the Hollywood film industry. The question of how Black American Cinema has compensated for the exclusion of accurate representations of Blacks in Hollywood, or “mainstream,” film is addressed. Other topics include: stereotypes, identity construction, and film theory.

CSCL 3910 – Topics: Music on the Edge of Chaos
“This course explores the idea that it is music on the edge of chaos which creates the flows of music and the writing of the discourses on music (history, criticism, analysis)... We will attempt to chart new waters by exploring music in that space-time between order and chaos where ‘avalanches of creative destruction and diversity’ are triggered (Bezat).”

CSCL 5301 – Society, Ideology and the Production of Art
“Recent critical theories on the relation of the arts to social and ideological forces; selected artifacts from Western culture (Renaissance to 20th century; high, popular, and mass cultures). Music, visual art, literature (Bulletin, 1996-1999).”
The aforementioned courses, in conjunction with my personal experience as an artist, will assist me in exploring African American art as a discourse within North American society. By focusing on the art of African Americans, I am able to converge the vast subject of artistic practice, and provide for myself an opportunity to gain a wealth of knowledge about my heritage.