

Class 12 : Blue Notes, Black Ink

A. The Poet Speaks

1. Class title 1 (Mobley: *Blues*, 1929)

The subject of this closing class is **Black Identity**. The first hour will be set in the United States, beginning with the **Harlem Renaissance** of the Twenties and Thirties. This renaissance was a social and political movement as well as a cultural one, and it involved all the arts. But if one medium should be privileged above all others, I think it would be a toss-up between poetry and jazz. So let's start with a clip that touches both: poet **Langston Hughes** (1901–67) reading his *Weary Blues* (1925). [I have shown this before, in another course.]

2. Langston Hughes: *The Weary Blues* (2:38)

3. Langston Hughes, with first edition of *The Weary Blues*

There is a cognitive dissonance in that video; did you catch it? Hughes is talking about a black musician playing jazz, yet the band playing behind him is entirely white! Which might be understandable, given that this comes from a TV program in Vancouver, Canada, in 1958, but it is at least ironic. For any Black musician will tell you that although jazz is played by Caucasians too, its origins are in Black music. The ironic dissonance is also a reminder that here I am, a white man, lecturing to an all-white audience about Black culture. And to make matters worse, I am not even American!

4. Four poets: Johnson, Hughes, McKay, and Cullen

I'll come back to music in a moment; for now I am sticking with poetry, with five more up my sleeve. I could do the whole class on Hughes alone; there is nothing by him that I do not enjoy. But just one more, to show his range. It is very personal, and not jazzy at all, simply the words of a Black mother to her young son. The reader is **Viola Davis**; I don't know who painted the picture.

5. Langston Hughes: *Mother to Son* (1:45)

6. — text of the above

Langston Hughes may have been, so to speak, the Poet Laureate of Harlem, but he was preceded by the ten-years-older **Claude McKay** (1890–1948). McKay was born in Jamaica, and moved to New York in 1914 to attend college. Shortly after the end of World War One, there was a spate of anti-Negro riots and lynchings. So the publication of McKay's sonnet "If we must die" in 1919 came as a rallying cry. The reader is a poet from the present day, **Kevin Young**.

7. Claude McKay: "If we must die" (1:02)

8. — text of the above

[Cut saves 2 minutes] Like many others at that time, McKay was, or soon became, a Communist. But I would not have you think he was anti-America. Here is another sonnet, from 1921, that shows his complex feelings for his new country, but also his love for her. I don't know the name of the speaker.

9. Claude McKay: *America* (0:51)

10. — text of the above (optional)

B. History in Color

11. Section title B (the image below)

12. Robert Colescott: *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware* (1975. NY Met)

13. — museum captions to the above

I am in no position to give a balanced history of the Harlem Renaissance, and am actually half a century on from it with this, though I'll work my way back. Instead, in the context of a course on National Identity, I am concerned to answer the question: *What makes these artworks by Black artists specifically Black?* When attempting to answer a similar question about America as a whole, two weeks ago, I started with the use of the nation's history. So, although the painter **Robert Colescott** (1925–2009) was born only after the Harlem Renaissance was already in full swing, I felt that this picture might make a good comparison. The Metropolitan Museum of Art admirably hangs it in the next room to the huge **Emmanuel Leutze** painting that it parodies, and I took a photo of the labels when I was in New York a month ago. It is a perfect example of looking at history through another lens—as well as being a critique of how Black people have allowed themselves to be caricatured and exploited.

14. Jacob Lawrence: *We crossed the River at McKonkey's Ferry* (1956, NY Met)

The Met also has another African-American rendition of the same event. This one by **Jacob Lawrence** (1917–2000) is no parody, despite its bright colors. Instead of showing the heroic figure of Washington himself, he puts himself into the minds of the frozen soldiers rowing across the river after him. It is from a 32-panel sequence called *The American Struggle* that Lawrence painted between 1954 and 1956. Instead of a title, each panel has a quotation from one of the people involved.

15. Jacob Lawrence: *American Struggle* series, panels 19 and 27

Here are two more. The one on the left, which relates to a failed slave rebellion in 1810, is the only one to deal specifically with African Americans. But Lawrence's racial identity informs his perspective throughout. So the Crossing of the Delaware was about peons, not generals. And what do you make of this picture on the right? The quotation is actually from **James Madison** seeking the approval of Congress for the War of 1812, in reprisal for the British practice of pressing American seamen into service with the Royal Navy. But the way they are depicted says SLAVERY all the way through.

16. Jacob Lawrence: *The Migration of the Negro*, panel 1 (1941, Philips Collection, DC)

Lawrence was born just before the start of the Harlem Renaissance, but in an earlier series he depicted the event that made the borough into virtually an all-Black city: the **Great Migration**, when millions of Blacks moved from the Jim Crow South to the industrial North, beginning in the teens of the century.

17. Slices of pictures by Colescott, Lawrence, and Douglas

18. African fabrics

These all reflect an African American perspective in subject, yes, but what about style? If you put together swatches of some of those we have already seen (plus one rather earlier), what do you see? I am going out a bit on a limb here, but I see a clear influence of the jagged and flattened forms deriving from **Fauvism** and **Cubism**. But even more, there is a similarity to the bright colors and strong patterns of traditional **African fabrics**. Yes, you will find art by African Americans that does not have these qualities, but they are surprisingly frequent once you know to look for them.

19. Aaron Douglas: *Aspects of Negro Life: Slavery through Reconstruction* (1934)

The swatch on the right of my four-picture sampler was by this man, **Aaron Douglas** (1899–1979), undoubtedly the Dean of Harlem Renaissance painters. He was in there painting from the very start of the Harlem Renaissance, but this is a later work, another historical series. This is a reconstruction in a park in Topeka of one in a series of four murals—two elongated, two square—that he painted under the auspices of the WPA for a library in New York. The title, *Aspects of Negro Life: Slavery through Reconstruction*, strictly speaking only applies to this panel, though it could easily stand for the whole.

20. Aaron Douglas: *Aspects of Negro Life*, panels 1 and 3

The two square panels are easy enough to decipher. The one on the left, *The Negro in an African Setting*, is set before enslavement, and shows Africans dancing in their own land. The one on the right, *The Song of the Towers*, indicates the Promised Land of the North as the goal of the Great Migration.

21. Aaron Douglas: *Aspects of Negro Life*, panels 2 and 4

But interpretation of the two horizontal panels is more complicated. The second, *Slavery to Reconstruction*, is centered on the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, celebrated with an outbreak of music—but its promise is shaded by the facts of the Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and lynching. The fourth, *Idyll of the Deep South*, is bitterly ironic. Yes, the guiding star shines from the left edge of the picture, but the people at the center and right might almost still be enslaved.

C. Lift Every Voice

22. Section title C (Motley: *Holy Rollers*)

23. — the same without title

In my class two weeks ago, I mentioned that another way National Identity might be expressed was through religion; it emphatically works for Racial Identity too. This is the same artist, **Archibald J. Motley**

(1891–1981) as I used for my first title; despite his slightly cartoonish quality, he was probably one of the best observers of the social side of the Renaissance, Harlem crowds. As it happens, he was raised a Catholic, so this depiction of a **Pentacostal Church** has something of the fascination of an ethnographic field trip. This may be extreme, but the joyous celebration of belief remains an African American characteristic to this day.

[Cut saves 3½ minutes] Witness this video of gospel singer **Kirk Franklin** leading an impromptu choir in his own house in *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, often referred to as the **Negro National Anthem**. They will sing one verse, then riff on the last two lines.

24. Kirk Franklin: “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (2:30, optional)

25. Laura Wheeler Waring: *James Weldon Johnson, with text* (1943, Washington NPG)

The hymn is the work of the man shown here. Written in 1900, it was not immediately published, but spread by a kind of ethnic osmosis.

This is a posthumous portrait of **James Weldon Johnson** (1871–1938), a poet of an earlier generation. The background seems to represent the Garden of Eden and God’s creation of Adam, which is the subject of Johnson’s second-most-famous poem, *Creation; a Negro Sermon* (1927). And I have a marvelous reading of that by **Wintley Phipps**, to which I have attached more paintings by **Aaron Douglas**.

25z Laura Wheeler Waring: *James Weldon Johnson, without text* (1943, Washington NPG)

26. James Weldon Johnson: *The Creation: a Negro Sermon* (4:38)

27. Sidney Poitier as Simon of Cyrene in *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965)

[Cut saves 2 minutes] There is a poster on Erdman Avenue that I pass each week. Its text is something like “Love Jesus. Obey Him Joyfully.” The picture shows a young boy reaching up to clasp an adult hand. I think the boy is either white or of indeterminate race, but the hand reaching down is unmistakably black. I don’t know of anything from the Harlem Renaissance that depicts Jesus as Black, but there is this poignant poem by **Countee Cullen** (1903–46) that treats **Simon of Cyrene**—the man who bears the cross of Jesus when he can no longer carry it—as black; Cyrene apparently is a place in Africa. And here is **Sidney Poitier** in the role in a 1965 film. I don’t know the name of the reader in the amateur video.

28. Countee Cullen: *Simon the Cyrenian Speaks* (0:37, optional)

29. Alvin Ailey, with a scene from *Revelations*

Most of the time, however, African Americans celebrate religion in a spirit of joy. So it is with the signature work, *Revelations* (1960), by **Alvin Ailey** (1931–89). I was going to show this last week, as an example of Abstract Expressionism, at least in the stage lighting, but it fits better here. The sequence is called “Take me to the Water” and depicts people on their way to a baptism.

30. Alvin Ailey: “Take me to the Water” from *Revelations* (2:09)

D. It Don't Mean a Thing

31. Section title D (unidentified jazz picture)

Although the last class had quite a bit of jazz in it, played indeed by Black musicians, it was the cooler mid-century jazz. To look at the music of the Harlem Renaissance, we need to think of stride and swing, and the era of big bands playing in dance halls. I'm going to give you samples of two such pieces—by **Eubie Blake** and **Duke Ellington**—serving as the bread for a sandwich whose filling is a piece by a classical African American composer, **William Grant Still**, for no, it wasn't *all* jazz back then.

32. “Wild About Harry” from *Shuffle Along* (1921)

One of the most successful jazz pianists in the early years of the Harlem Renaissance was Baltimore-born **Eubie Blake** (1887–1983). Together with band-leader **Noble Sissle** (1889–1975), he was responsible for composing the very first all-Black musical, *Shuffle Along*, which opened in 1921 and soon became a monster hit. Although performed Uptown, it attracted hordes of wealthier audiences and had a lasting effect on ideas of race on the Broadway stage. My clip comes from the Tony Awards of 2016, celebrating the revival of a more complex version which also aspired to tell the story of how the musical came to be.

33. Blake & Sissle: *Shuffle Along*, 2016 revival (3:48)

33z — alternate shorter version (1:46)

34. William Grant Still, and sculptures inspiring his *Suite for Violin and Piano*

Looking through early-20th-century Black composers, I came upon two names in particular: **Florence Price** (1887–1953), the first African-American woman to be performed by a major orchestra, and **William Grant Still** (1895–1978), whom the BSO performed only last month. Price wrote beautiful music in a rather Elgarian vein, but there is nothing about it to suggest that it is the work of an American composer, let alone a Black woman. Still, on the other hand, is American through and through; you will hear this from the first note. I have chosen to feature a relatively late work, his *Suite for Violin and Piano* of 1943, mainly because it is more compact, but also because each of the three movements is inspired by a piece by Harlem Renaissance sculptors, which is a medium we have not visited yet. The three are **Richmond Barthé** (1901–88), **Sargent Johnson** (1888–1967), and **Augusta Savage** (1892–1962). I will give you 40 seconds of each of the first two movements to get the flavor, then the third complete, played by a young Black violinist.

35. William Grant Still: *Suite for Violin and Piano*, excerpts (3:36)

35z — alternate shorter version (2:20)

36. Joel A. Rogers on Jazz 1

37. Joel A. Rogers on Jazz 2

In preparing this class, I have made much use of a wonderful anthology, *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader* (Penguin, 1994). It contains a splendid short essay on jazz by Jamaican-born critic **Joel A. Rogers** (1880–1966). He demonstrates, convincingly enough for me, the connections between the predecessors of jazz and African or Caribbean dancing and drumming. But whatever its origins, he

then goes on generously to declare it a property of *all* Americans. All the same, he says elsewhere that African Americans have something as performers that few white musicians ever manage. Or in the words of the composer and bandleader **Duke Ellington** (1899–1974), “It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing!” So let’s hear it!

38. Ellington: *It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing!*
39. Intermission title (Duke Ellington)

E. An Old Sound, New

40. Section title E (IbrahimEl-Salah painting)

My second hour is almost all videos. Let’s take the first one as a quiz. Someone has given you a ticket for a concert. You know nothing about it. You are running late and don’t even have time to look at the program before the concert starts. This is what you hear; what on earth do you make of it? [I have cropped the bottom in places to hide the title.]

41. Nkeiru Okoye: *Black Bottom: 1. Shout* (3:14)
42. — still from the above

So the questions: Where are you? What is the date of the work? What might it be called? What can you guess about the composer? And the answers: you are at the Detroit Symphony Hall; it is a new work, written in 2020; its title is *Black Bottom*, and this opening movement is called *Tribute 1: Shout*.

43. Nkeiru Okoye (b. 1972), the composer of *Black Bottom* (2020)

The composer is **Nkeiru Okoye** (1972–), born in 1972 in New York. Her mother is African American, but her father is Nigerian, and she spent a lot of her childhood there. She is therefore a different kind of Black artist, whose African roots do not merely go back to before slavery, but are part of the present-day culture in which she grew up. It is a complex situation. You can hear it, I think, in her music. The title *Black Bottom* and the big-band feel goes back to the 1920s. The opening sound made by that fabulous soprano sounds awfully like a police or ambulance siren. Yet the rhythm, the bongos in the orchestra, and the nature of the singing—she is right to call it “shout”—hardly sound American at all.

44. Walcott, Shonibare, N’Dour

It is complex, as I say. African voices today do not only come to us as a legacy of the American South. In the rest of this class, I am going to offer three vignettes of major Black artists, each in a different situation and working in a different medium: the Nobel Prizewinning poet **Derek Walcott** (1930–2017), representing an older generation of Afro-Caribbean artists; the highly honored British sculptor **Yinka Shonibare** (1962–), who was born in London of Nigerian parents, but spent all his childhood in Africa; and the Senegalese singer-songwriter **Youssou N’Dour** (1959–), who brought African music to the pop charts of the entire world.

F. A Caribbean Colorist

45. Section title F (Walcott painting)

When the Nobel laureate Sir Derek Walcott died in 2017, the BBC had the actor **Linton Kwesi Johnson** read his poem *Love After Love* as a tribute. It is about coming to recognize yourself later in life and being content with who you are. I will play it again, read by the author himself, to end the section.

46. Walcott: *Love After Love*, read by Linton Kwesi Johnson (1:07)

47. Walcott: Self-Portrait and quote from *The Schooner "Flight"*

Walcott called the Caribbean island of **Saint Lucia** his home for his entire life, although he traveled widely as his fame spread. He is of mixed race. The protagonist of his poem *The Schooner "Flight"*, clearly something of a self-portrait, describes himself as "...just a red nigger who love the sea. [...] I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me, and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation." When he was born in 1930, Saint Lucia was still part of the British Empire; it gained its independence in 1967. So you would expect his writing to contain some critique of colonialism; it is a common factor in much of the art of the later 20th century, as we shall see in the next artist I discuss. But with Walcott this does not seem to be so. Here he is in an interview with **Bill Moyers** on one of his many visits to the United States.

48. Walcott interview with Bill Moyers (1:53)

49. Walcott: *Far Cry from Africa*, title

Walcott may not have resented British colonialism, but **his relationship to Africa was complicated**. The continent is present in many of his works, as a looming presence the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, from which his ancestors were brought against their will. His epic poem *Omeros* (1990) reimagines, in part, the long voyage of Odysseus to his own island of Ithaca. But nowhere are the complexities of his situation as a British-educated Black man examined as poignantly as in the 1962 poem *Far Cry from Africa*. I have an audio recording of Walcott reading it, and thought I'd illustrate it with African photographs such as this. But the poem is much more stark than that. Written in response to the **Mau Mau uprisings** around 1960, when Kenyan terrorists murdered white settlers on their farms, it is about death: deaths of black Africans from starvation, and white settlers through murder. Walcott is torn, not knowing what side he should be on; the poem makes no attempt to resolve the conflict. [The photo that accompanies the poem is actually from Black-on-Black massacre, from **Rwanda** in 1994.]

50. Walcott: *Far Cry from Africa* (2:10)

51. Walcott: [boat picture, title not known]

But I would not leave you with such a grim picture. Walcott was also a painter, as you see. So I'll end the section with part of another interview, this time with an author, **Donald Friedman**, who was writing a book of writers that paint. And after that, the trailer to a film made when he was an old man, *Poetry is an Island*. And you will hear that he too goes back to that early poem, *Love After Love*.

52. Walcott: Interview with Donald Friedman (2:31)

53. Trailer, *Poetry is an Island* (3:04)

G. In Colonial Costumes

54. Shonibare: Yorkshire exhibition video, opening sequence (0:33)

55. Yinka Shonibare in front of “Two heads (gentlemen)”

That was the opening of a video on the man shown here, Yinka Shonibare; I will show you a longer clip from it in a moment. Shonibare, born in London of Nigerian parents but essentially raised in Africa, has become a prolific artist, whose output includes sculpture, painting, film, choreography, and photographic recreations of classic images. But I am going to concentrate on the kind of thing we see on the right of this picture: figures in colorful costumes. Let’s start by looking at the sculpture in the background here, and then I’ll let the videos take up the story.

56. Yinka Shonibare: *How to Blow up Two Heads at the Same Time (Gentlemen)*, 2006

What do you make of this? The title, clearly, is a joke; the figures already have no heads. It is a duel, clearly, an affair of honor between gentlemen in the 18th or early 19th centuries. The costumes are correct in cut, but not their fabric, so what is going on? I hope that one or other of the next two videos may explain it. Excuse the horrible music in this one, but the content is good.

57. Shonibare: Yorkshire exhibition video, central sequence (3:24)

58. Yinka Shonibare: *Woman Shooting Cherry Blossom* (2019)

It is clear that Yinka Shonibare has a sense of humor, and takes a delight in interrogating history. Interrogating it, not appropriating it; it is a less radical process than simply restaging an icon such as *Washington Crossing the Delaware* with black figures. In fact, his figures give not obvious clue as to their race; they have no heads. But although the Yinka insists that he is an artist, not a politician, his works do have a political or social subtext. This will be more explicit in the latter part of the next video, when he discusses his tableau, *The Scramble for Africa*.

59. Shonibare: Bloomberg video, political subjects (1:29)

60. Yinka Shonibare: *Wind Sculptures* (2018–)

More recently, Shonibare has been developing his interest in so-called African fabrics to create works of large-scale public sculpture remarkable for their beauty rather than any overt political context. These are his *Wind Sculptures*, made to look as though they are cloth blowing in the wind, but in fact made out of painted fiberglass—or bronze in the case of the most recent of them, made for a garden in Stockholm. The music is by **Ludovico Einaudi**, a contemporary but by no means a modern composer..

61. Yinka Shonibare: *Wind Sculpture in Bronze 1* (2022, Stockholm)

62. — still of the above

H. Nothing is in Vain

63. Section title H (Youssou N'Dour)

Nothing is in Vain is the title of a 2002 album by the singer-songwriter **Youssou N'Dour**. Like most of his other albums, it quickly shot to the top of the World Music charts, largely due to his ability to sound strange and exotic yet somehow familiar at the same time. He has done many things since, but this is the CD I happen to have.

64. Aboudia, Boafo, Crosby

I shall play two tracks, each of which I have made into a montage. The first one, *Li Ma Weesu*, is in Wolof (I think); apparently it means "As in a mirror," and refers to someone looking back on his past life. I am accompanying it with five pictures each by the three artists shown here, whose names happen to make a nice ABC! All were born within a year of each other; all came to Western countries for their higher education; and all live at least part of the time in Europe or America. But all have preserved their African identities. **Aboudia Diarrassouba** (1983–) and **Amaoko Boafo** (1984–) can probably speak for themselves. But it might be helpful to know that **Nideka Akunyili Crosby** (1983–) married a white artist from Texas, and that the mixed marriage of black and white is a frequent theme in her work. Perhaps this also informs her choice of a mixed-media technique, combining realist painting with collage.

65. Youssou N'Dour: *Li Ma Weesu* (3:54)

66. "Africa, Dream Again," title

The last track on the CD is a song of hope for the entire continent: "Africa, Dream Again." It is partly in Wolof, but there is enough in English to give you the gist: "Wake up, stand up Africa! Immense is your wealth. Immense are your dreams. Africa, live again, win again." For this, I have added photographs of African children and young people, in whom the hope of the future presumably lies. I must admit to arranging them in a sequence that some might find sentimental, but others may be moved.

67. Youssou N'Dour: *Africa, Dream again* (3:13)

68. Closing title