

SST 598: Robert Johnson, The Devil's Music, and the Blues: An Exploration in Black Southern Culture and Mythology (Spring 2011)

Tues. 4 – 6:30 PM in Barnard Observatory 108

Instructor: Dr. Adam Gussow

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Office Hours: Mon. 10:30–12:30 and by appointment

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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

The vexed figure of Delta bluesman Robert Johnson (1911-1938) sits at the center of what is arguably the most persistent mythology of the blues. He “sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads” we are told, in exchange for superhuman prowess on the guitar. Johnson’s purported soul-sale has provided fodder for a wide range of imaginative investments, from novels such as Ace Atkins’s *Crossroad Blues* and Walter Mosley’s *R. L.’s Dream*, to Hollywood films such as *Crossroads*, to early blues scholarship by fantasists such as Rudi Blesh and Greil Marcus. At the same time, revisionist scholars such as Elijah Wald, Patricia Schroeder, Barry Lee Pearson, and Bill McCullough have sharply criticized the myth-purveyors, regrounding Johnson in fresh, nuanced understandings of both his Delta milieu and the way in which his spectral figure has served various constituencies in contemporary America.

The question of Johnson’s devilish soul-sale at some unnamed southern crossroads opens out, in turn, into a larger dialogue about the relationship between black southern religions—Christianity, hoodoo, and voodoo—and the so-called “devil’s music”; between sacred and secular realms within black popular music as a whole. The persistence of African cultural elements (especially the crossroads spirits Legba and Esu) and the evangelizing of slave culture in the antebellum South are a part of this dialogue. Drawing on readings from a wide range of disciplines, we’ll explore all these issues and more.

COURSE OBJECTIVES AND LEARNING OUTCOMES:

After completing this course, students will have:

- *) a greatly improved knowledge-base from which to evaluate a range of blues-based texts, especially those connected in some way with the course themes;
- *) a keener sense of the way in which southern culture—in this case, blues culture and black southern religious culture—is a creole culture, an evolving hybrid of European and African cultural elements;
- *) a greatly increased ability to think critically about Robert Johnson and his crossroads soul-sale, using a range of disciplinary approaches;
- *) an improved ability to develop, research and write a term paper, plus an improved ability to craft a short seminar paper;
- *) a greater facility at presenting and defending their ideas in a classroom setting

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues*

Jon Michael Spencer, *Blues and Evil*

Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues*

*Julio Finn, *The Bluesman*

Teresa L. Reed, *The Holy Profane: Religion in Black Popular Music*

John M. Giggie, *After Redemption: Jim Crow and the Transformation of African American Religion in the Delta, 1875-1915*

Ace Atkins, *Crossroad Blues*

Walter Mosley, *R.L.'s Dream*

Akira Hiramoto, *Me and the Devil Blues 1: The Unreal Life of Robert Johnson*

***Crossroads* [film] starring Ralph Macchio and Joe Seneca

selected readings to be downloaded from Dr. Gussow's account on Tradebit.com

*You should purchase a used copy of this text from one of Amazon's listings. (15 copies are currently available for less than \$10) If you show up in class without a copy of this text, you will be counted as absent.

**This is an optional purchase, since I will be showing the film in class. I urge you to purchase the DVD regardless. Amazon currently lists 15 used copies for less than \$7.50

EVALUATION:

Attendance and Participation: 10%

A seminar lives or dies based on the regular attendance and active participation of each of its members. Each of you begins the term with a B in this category. If you participate actively, intelligently, and courteously, in a way that bespeaks both careful preparation and a willingness to extend yourself in dialogue, your class participation grade will go up. If you remain silent, contribute in ways that betray a lack of preparation, and/or become overbearing or intolerant in ways that discourage dialogue, your grade will go down. **If you fail to bring a given week's texts to class, I will assume that you haven't done the reading and I will note that in my grade book.** While you are expected to attend every session, illness and family emergencies do happen; you may miss any two sessions without penalty. Please husband your allowable absences carefully and deploy them wisely. A third absence, for any reason, will give you an "Attendance and Participation" grade of D, which may well have the effect of lowering your final course grade by a full letter. A fourth absence will result in automatic failure in the course. You get points in this category for active in-class engagement, probing questions, and perceptive comments on our reading materials. Please note: You should meet with me during my office hours at least once in the course of the term to discuss your progress in the class and your plans for the term paper.

Call-and-Response Papers: 40%

You are required to write three (3) call-and-response papers in the course of the term. Each paper will consist of three parts, which you should identify with subheadings:

1) CALL: a paragraph or two in which you sketch, quickly but with relevant textual detail, some thematic thread, ideological stance, rhetorical strategy, or other point of interest that you've noticed at work in one (or several) of the week's readings; an objectively describable way in which this text "calls" to you and/or its other readers. Think of the "call" as the nucleus or sketch of a possible paper, a quick-hit bit of close attention to the text.

2) RESPONSE: a paragraph or two in which you broaden your discussion in a way that answers one or more of the following questions: What are the stakes here? Why did/does this text *matter*? How does this text fit into and/or unsettle the "devil's music" tradition as the course is helping you to understand it? How might the critical approach propounded by one or more of our secondary texts help us understand our primary text this week and/or significant texts from earlier weeks? By the end of your paper, you should find a way of bringing two (or more) of the week's assigned readings into dialogue. Synthesis, not just analysis, is the point.

3) QUESTION: one or two good, thought-provoking questions for class discussion.

There is a strict, non-negotiable length-limit to call-and-response papers: your paper must be no longer than one page. You may play with formatting, if need be, in order to fit your text onto one page--i.e., 10-point type, single spaced, narrow margins--but you may not exceed that limit. (In the past, most students have enough to say that single-spacing and/or a smaller typeface turns out to be a necessity.)

On the day when you have a call-and-response paper due, you should bring enough copies for every person in seminar, including me. We'll distribute these at the beginning of class; I'll page through them and figure out a rough sequence in which we'll address them. When your turn comes, you will read your paper out loud, concluding with the question, and the class as a whole will respond to your call. For obvious reasons, no late call-and-response papers will be accepted. If you are absent on a day when you have a call-and-response paper due, please email me your paper as a .doc attachment by 3 PM so that I can read it in class.

Final Paper: 50%

A standard academic research paper: roughly 20 pages for graduate students; roughly 15 pages for undergrads. This paper should explore in depth a significant question raised by the course readings. While you'll probably want to focus on and/or make use of those readings, you may, with my permission, write on relevant texts not on the syllabus. Your paper should be double-spaced in 12-point type with standard margins. You may follow either the MLA or Chicago style manual. Please come and speak with me if you have any questions or concerns here. Your term paper is due by 4 PM on at my office (C-213 Bondurant) on Friday, May 6th. Emailed term papers will NOT be accepted.

Late Assignments:

Graduate students and undergraduate seniors taking a 500-level course are expected to turn in all assignments on time.

Plagiarism:

Don't. I have a zero-tolerance policy. I report suspected cases of plagiarism through official channels and I urge that they be prosecuted to the fullest possible extent allowed by University of Mississippi regulations. If you're in any doubt about what those regulations are, please contact or visit the university's Writing Center (http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/writing_center/)

SCHEDULE OF READINGS:

- 1/25: Introduction
"The Search for Robert Johnson" (documentary)
- 2/1: Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*
- 2/8: Spencer, *Blues and Evil*
Davis, "Who Is Elegua? Trickster at the Crossroads"
Richards, "The Crossroads and the Myth of the Mississippi Delta Bluesman"
C&R papers due from 1's
- 2/15: Wald, *Escaping the Delta* (pp. xiii-102, 194-249)
Nardone, "Roomful of Blues: Jukejoints and the Cultural Landscape of the Mississippi Delta"
C&R papers due from 2's
- 2/22: Finn, *The Bluesman*
Kubik, *Africa and the Blues* (brief selection)
Epstein, "Conversion to Christianity"
C&R papers due from 3's
- 3/1: Giggie, *After Redemption*
Gussow, "Heaven and Hell Parties: Ministers, Bluesmen, and Black Youth in the Mississippi Delta, 1920-1942"
C&R papers due from 1's
- 3/8: Reed, *The Holy Profane*
Sacre', "The Saints and the Sinners Under the Swing of the Cross"
Humphrey, "Prodigal Sons: Son House and Robert Wilkins"
Springer, "God's Music vs. The Devil's Music: The Evidence from Blues Lyrics"
- 3/15: spring break - no seminar
- 3/22: Wald, *Escaping the Delta* (pp.105-189, 250-276)
Wardlow, "Stop, Look and Listen at the Crossroad"

- Pearson and McCullough, *Robert Johnson Lost and Found* (selections)
Lipsitz, "White Desire: Remembering Robert Johnson"
C&R papers due from 2's
- 3/29: Harris, *Robert Johnson: Trick the Devil*
Hyatt, "Hoodoo – Conjuraton – Witchcraft – Rootwork" (selections)
Smith, "Blues, Criticism, and the Signifying Trickster"
C&R papers due from 3's
- 4/5: *Crossroads* (film)
Fitzsimmons, "Hellhound on My Trail: Crossroads and the Racist Ravishment"
Note: in order to make room for a screening of the film and subsequent discussion, class will be extended until 7 PM. Our seminar will meet in Bondurant auditorium and will be joined by Dr. Ownby's SST 402 class.
C&R papers due from 1's. Please email papers to instructor (agussow@olemiss.edu) by Friday 4/8 at 4 PM
- 4/12: Atkins, *Crossroad Blues*
Lieberfeld, "Million-Dollar Juke Joint: Commodifying Blues Culture"
C&R papers due from 2's
- 4/19: Mosley, *RL's Dream*
Schroeder, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference"
C&R papers due from 3's
- 4/26: Hiramoto, *Me and the Devil Blues*
Schroeder, "Robert Johnson as Contested Space"
- 5/3: Oral presentations on research projects (5 minute summary, with questions by instructor and students)

Term papers due at instructor's office (Bondurant C-213) by 4 PM on Friday, May 6th. No extensions granted!