HEARING DIFFERENCE:  
The Commercial Music Industry and the American Racial Imaginary  
IDSEM-UG1802  
Fall 2015  
Friday, 12:30 – 3:15pm  
Silver Center  
100 Washington Sq. East  
Room 518  
New York University  
Figure 1: Bert Williams - Promotional photo by Samuel Lumiere (1921)

INSTRUCTOR:
Professor Kwami Coleman  
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Office Hours:
Tues. & Thurs.  
2:30-4:30p  
and by appt.

SYNOPSIS:
In 1903, at the dawn of the American commercial music industry, the sociologist W. E. B. DuBois famously proclaimed that the foremost problem in twentieth century American society is “the problem of the color line.” Du Bois’s prescience sets the stage for this course’s exploration of racial identity in recorded, commercially available music. We will examine how racial performance has intermingled with music consumption in the United States since blackface minstrelsy in the 1830s. Our goal is to understand how deeply embedded race – both ascribed and claimed – is in American music culture, reverberating throughout the last century in debates on artists’ authenticity, propriety, and popularity.

This course is organized chronologically; each week is devoted to a particular era and its corresponding musical genres leading up to the present. Students will be guided through reading and listening assignments, developing critical thinking and listening skills and gaining a historical perspective on contemporary issues in American music culture like “crossing over,” cultural appropriation, protest and resistance, aural/visual racial stereotypes, and racialized performances of gender and sexuality.

REQ’D MATERIALS:
All materials (PDFs and audio files) can be found on the “Resources” and “Course Soundcloud” pages of our course site: http://wp.nyu.edu/hearingdifference2015. Links to the pages can be found in the menu bar at the top of the page.
GRADING:

- 10%: Participation (in-class discussion)
- 20%: Weekly blog posts
- 20%: “Critical Listening Habits” assignment
- 15%: Final paper abstract
- 25%: Final paper
- 10%: Final paper presentation

EXPECTATION OF CLASS PARTICIPATION:

1) Attendance: This is a 3-hr period class that meets only once a week, therefore it’s imperative that you come to every meeting to ensure your success in the course. You are allowed one unexcused absence; every subsequent unexcused absence will detract a half point from your final transcript grade (i.e. A- becomes B+). More than three unexcused absences is an automatic fail.

2) Preparation: You will complete the reading and listening assignment in full by the start of each class. Bringing (paper) hardcopies of the readings to class is preferred, but you may also refer to the electronic versions by accessing your laptop or tablet. Completing the reading and listening assignment prepares you to fully engage and participate in the class discussion of the material. Attendance alone does not constitute participation.

3) Electronics: If you do use your laptop or tablet in class, no extraneous web browsing. It’s fairly easy for me, the instructor standing at the front of the class, to notice if you’re mindlessly browsing Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, etc.

4) Writing assignments & Papers: All writing assignments should be completed, proofread, and submitted by the due date. No late assignments will be accepted except in cases of a documented emergency…period. It is important that you budget your time carefully and give yourself ample time to think about, outline, write, and review your work.

5) In-class Conduct: This course focuses directly on issues of difference in terms of identity, specifically race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and personal habits of consumption. As such, many of the topics we will cover can be quite sensitive. Please exercise the utmost respect in class discussions towards both the material and your fellow classmates. Students should be allowed to voice their perspective(s) without fear of attack or belittling; likewise, any thoughts and observations on these topics in response to the reading and listening assignments must be voiced respectfully and in acknowledgement of each other’s (different) perspectives and lived experiences. Any categorically offensive behavior (remarks or gestures), whether made in class or online, are totally unacceptable and will be reported to the Dean’s Office.

EXPECTATION OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

As a Gallatin student, you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website (www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html)

If you have any questions about how to cite properly, what are acceptable references and source materials, or what constitutes plagiarism, please ask me!
HOW TO COMPLETE THE READING ASSIGNMENTS:
The reading assignments can be long, and a particular few can be challenging to read through. It is important that you give yourself enough time during the week to get through the approximately 130 pages (on average) of reading you will have weekly. With this in mind, there are important strategies that you can utilize to get through the readings efficiently and, most importantly, effectively. These strategies include:

• Looking over the assigned reading critically, taking note of what looks like the most important headings, subheadings, sections, paragraphs, etc. to get a sense of the “big picture.” Skim through the excerpt to find topical and sub-topical sentences that will clue you in to the content of each paragraph and the overall organization of the piece.

• Considering paragraphs as whole units of information that can be taken one at a time. Read and re-read them until you can answer the question: “What is the author saying in this paragraph?” How does it relate to the ‘big picture’?”

• Retaining important details and mark major conceptual “signposts” by underlining, making notes in the margin, and/or making notes in your notebook. Taking notes on a reading assignment is not excessive or redundant; it is an excellent way to ensure that you are internalizing this information!

• Attempting, after reading a few paragraphs, a major section, or the entire excerpt, to visualize and articulate the most important points of what you just read in your own words. Doing this will test your understanding of the material and help you develop good questions for our in-class discussion.

HOW TO COMPLETE THE LISTENING ASSIGNMENTS:
I do not assume that you are a trained musician with perfect pitch, flawless musicianship, and an ironclad understanding of music theory. It is neither essential nor required that you read music notation for this course. What I do expect from you is that you listen to the recordings critically, make note of the content (e.g. lyrics), mood, instrumentation, texture of the voice and/or instruments, and gain a sense for the major sections of the song (i.e. intro, verse, chorus, interlude, outro) by using timestamps (i.e. “1:45”) to mark special moments. Consider how the recording relates to the reading assignment. And, by all means, if you feel unsure about any aspect of your “hearing” of the material, shoot me an email!

HOW TO COMPLETE THE WEEKLY BLOG POSTS:
You will craft an essay of no less than 400 words in response to the week’s reading and listening assignment and post it by 10pm on the Thursday before class. Sometimes I will provide you with a prompt for a particular entry (posted on the corresponding page under the “Student Responses” heading on the course website) and other times your objective will be to react to the texts and listening assignments. The latter kind of “open response” can include one or more of the following: a) describing how the texts relate to each other by understanding, synthesizing, and comparing the authors’ main points; b) discussing the listening assignment in relation to one or more texts; c) exploring questions that the material raised for you in the context of previous class discussions or the course’s theme or objectives, being careful to cite specific passages in the text; d) drawing connections to events in contemporary popular (commercial) music and culture. You should use footnotes or in-text (parenthetical) citations when quoting specific passages or referring to pages in the text.

Your responses will be graded according to this scale: 0=fail, 1=low pass, 2=satisfactory, 3=high pass.
**SCHEDULE:**

I. Sept. 4: Introduction

Overview of syllabus and major concepts: What is race and ethnicity? How is race and ethnicity understood, broadly, in American culture? What are the origins of the commercial music industry in the United States (sheet music publishers, early commercial recording companies and technology, radio)?

II. Sept. 11: Overview of Race Ideology in the United States (18th c. – 19th c.); Intro. to Recording Technology

Reading: 1) W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903/2003); Ch. 1 & Ch. 14 (pp. 7-15, 177-88).
2) Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (2010); Ch. 8 & Ch. 9 (pp. 104-150).

Listening: 1) Fisk Jubilee Singers, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” (1909)
2) Edison cylinder of “Listen to the Mocking Bird” (~1912)

III. Sept. 18: Early American Popular Music (Early - Mid 19th c.)


Explore: 1) Stephen C. Foster, “Massa’s In De Cold Ground” (1852 - sheet music)
2) Stephen C. Foster, “Old Black Joe” (1860 - sheet music)

IV. Sept. 25: The Birth of the Commercial Music Industry (Late 19th c.)


Listening: 1) George W. Johnson, “The Laughing Song” (1890)
2) George W. Johnson, “Whistling Coon” (1890)
3) Scott Joplin, “Maple Leaf Rag” (1916)
4) Scott Joplin, “Elite Syncopations” (1916)

V. Oct. 2: Early Commercial Recordings (Pt. 1): “Classical Music” and Opera (Late 19th c. – Early 20th c.)

Reading: 1) Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (1988): Ch. 2 (pp. 85-168) & Ch. 3 (pp. 169-184 only)

Listening: 1) Sergei Rachmaninoff, Prelude in C-sharp Minor, Op. 3 (1919)
VI. Oct. 9: Early Commercial Recordings (Pt. 2): “Race Records” and “Hillbilly Music” (1920-30s)


Listening: 1) James Reese Europe, “Hesitating Blues” (1919)
2) Mamie Smith, “Crazy Blues” (1920)
4) Fiddlin’ John Carson, “Dixie Cowboy” (1924)
5) The Skillet Lickers, “I Got Mine” (ca. 1926-7)

VII. Oct. 16: Jazz (1917-50)


Listening: 1) Original Dixieland Jazz Band, “Dixieland Jass One-Step” (1917)
2) Jelly Roll Morton, “Mr. Jelly Lord” (1923)
3) Louis Armstrong, “Heebie Jeebies” (1926)
4) Spirits of Rhythm, “I Got Rhythm” (1933)


3) TBD

Listening: 1) Xavier Cugat, “She’s a Bombshell from Brooklyn” from *Stage Door Canteen* (1943)
2) Desi Arnaz, “Cuban Pete” (1946), performed on *I Love Lucy*
3) Carmen Miranda, “Chica Chica Boom Chic” from *Copacabana* (1947)

IX. Oct. 30: Rhythm & Blues and Rock ‘n’ Roll (1950-60)

*Final Paper Abstract, Outline, and Annotated Bibliography Due at 12:30pm*


Listening: 1) Willie Mae “Big Momma” Thorton, “Hound Dog” (1952)
2) Little Esther, “Hound Dog” (1953)
3) Freddie Bell and the Bellboys, “Hound Dog” (1955)
4) Elvis Presley, “Hound Dog” (1956)

X. Nov. 6: Soul Music (1960-70)


Listening: 1) Sam Cooke, “A Change Is Gonna Come” (1963)
2) Aretha Franklin, “Dr. Feelgood (Live in Amsterdam)” (1968)
XI. Nov. 13: No Class; “Critical Listening Habits” Assignment Due at 12:30pm

XII. Nov. 20: Disco & Rap (Pt. 1)

XIII. Nov. 27: No Class (Thanksgiving Break)

XIV. Dec. 4: Rap (Pt. 2), Sex, Gender, and the Culture Industry
3) Brittney Cooper, “Iggy Azalea’s Post-racial Mess: America’s Oldest Race Tale, Remixed,” on Salon.com

XV. Dec. 11: Student Presentations 1; FINAL PAPERS DUE AT 12:30pm

XVI. Dec. 18: Student Presentations 2

Figure 2: Portrait of Egbert ("Bert") Austin Williams, by Samuel Lumiere (1921 or 1922)