

Mini-Syllabus: Memes and Blackness

written by Amber Officer-Narvasa | November 23, 2016



Image via [The Atlantic](#)

Course Description:

Aggravating, relatable, funny, prescient— wherever you look on the Internet, memes are there. In this course, we will explore the interstices, overlaps, and connections between Blackness and meme culture. Memes have become a way of marking mundane everyday moments, groundbreaking political changes, and everything in between. But beyond their immediate comic nature, memes have a complex relationship with the Black culture and bodies that they so often portray. Black cultural production is a driving force of memes. Young Black people on the Internet create memes, consume memes, and help make them famous. But memes have also been a way in which stereotypes about Black people are perpetuated and put on endless repeat in the annals of cyberspace. One need only consider the popularity of classic memes such as Sweet Brown and Bed Intruder to see the ways in which gendered and racialized narratives about Black degeneracy and urban poverty have manifested themselves through this medium. Because of the proliferation of memes that poke fun at the behavior and speech patterns of unsuspecting, often working-class Black subjects, some writers have even compared memes to a modern-day form of minstrelsy.

In this class, much of our analysis will be rooted in the writings of Black women journalists and cultural critics, such as Doreen St. Felix and Aria Dean, who have done recent work on meme culture. We will read works from cultural studies, surveillance studies, media theory, and other fields when considering the meme's complex relationship with Blackness. We will think about the meme as a form of surveillance, and discuss the role of memes in processing, consuming, and distributing images and videos of the Black body. We will also explore the meme's relationship to theories such as Afro-Pessimism and the practice of Black fugitivity. We will read theorists who critique the racist nature of many memes, as well as those who celebrate memes as a platform for Black creativity and inventiveness. By the end of this course, students will take away a deeper understanding of the role of race in visual culture, Black cultural production and new media, and some of the issues faced by racialized communities who attempt to create spaces and

narratives of their own on the Internet.

Books

- *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* by Simone Browne
- *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. DuBois (excerpts)
- *Discipline and Punish* by Michel Foucault (excerpts)
- *Routledge handbook of surveillance studies* by David Lyon, Kirstie Ball, and Kevin D. Haggerty
- *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* by Stuart Hall
- *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, C.A. Hill and M. Helmers, ed. (excerpts)
- *The undercommons: Fugitive planning & black study* by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten
- *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* by Frank B. Wilderson III

Articles

- [“Poor Meme, Rich Meme”](#) by Aria Dean (Real Life Mag)
- [“The Blackness of Meme Movement”](#) by Laur M. Jackson (Model View Culture)
- [“Memes and Misogynoir”](#) by Laur M. Jackson (The Awl)
- [“Black Teens Are Breaking the Internet and Seeing None of the Profits”](#) by Doreen St. Felix (The Fader)
- [Companion essay to “Wandering/Wilding: Blackness on the Internet”](#) by Aria Dean
- [“The Troubling Viral Trend of the ‘Hilarious’ Black Neighbor”](#) by Aisha Harris (Slate)
- [“A Tale of Two Memes: The Powerful Connection Between Trayvon Martin and Chen Guangcheng”](#) by An Xiao Mina (The Atlantic)
- [“Alabama officer fired over racist meme calling Michelle Obama ‘fluent in ghetto’”](#) by Lindsay Bever (Washington Post)

Papers

- [“Mama’s baby, papa’s maybe: An American grammar book.”](#) by Hortense J. Spillers (diacritics)
- [“Everybody’s Got a Little Light Under the Sun: Black Luminosity and the Visual Culture of Surveillance”](#) by Simone Browne (Cultural Studies)
- “Physical place and cyberplace: the rise of networked individualism” by Barry Wellman (International Journal of Urban and Regional Research)
- “Requiem for the Media” by Jean Baudrillard in For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign. (Trans. Charles Levin.)
- “Digital Whiteness, primitive Blackness: Racializing the “digital divide” in film and new media” by Janell Hobson (Feminist Media Studies)
- “Where was King Kong when we needed him?” Public discourse, digital disaster jokes, and the functions of laughter after 9/11” by G. Kuipers (The Journal of American Culture)
- “Subversive memes: Internet memes as a form of visual rhetoric” by Heidi E. Huntington (Selected Papers of Internet Research)

Some recommended viewing

- [“Bed Intruder Song”](#) (published by user San Nicksta on Youtube)
- [“Sweet Brown Toothache? Ain’t Nobody Got Time for That”](#) (published by Shortline Dental on Youtube)
- [June 21, 2014 Vine](#) by Kayla Newman