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Course: ENG 220: Literary Studies—African American Literature
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Maine School of Science & Mathematics

Osher Project Concept: A Blues Journey to Harlem

Unit's Core Theory, Blues/Jazz Principle, & Traits of Blues/Jazz

- ❖ The Principle: elements of blues and jazz are in all African American expression (according to Langston Hughes in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”).
- ❖ Traits of Blues/Jazz*
 - Simple structure, easy to learn
 - Repetition
 - Loose structure that allows for improvisation lyrically (and musically)
 - Begins with a negative reality
 - Claims power over the negative reality in the last line with irony and reaction
 - Recombines old things into new patterns, innovative

*The traits listed apply more directly to blues; jazz utilizes some of these traits directly, applies others in different ways, and diverges to varying degrees from the first trait (simple structure) altogether, specifically for the purpose of exploring and exploiting the boundaries of musical performance and understanding. In other words, the blues artist danced beautifully and even elaborately over very predictable, basic chord and rhythms; the jazz artist has to dance into other dimensions, over chord and rhythm patterns much more complex and less predictable. Repetition is still there, however, providing some landmarks, though perhaps only in barely discernable, ghostly form. Loose structure is still common in jazz, and recombination is also common, though sometimes the old things are almost indecipherable at first listen. The two blues traits that are direct responses to the oppressive dominant culture—beginning with a negative reality and claiming power through irony—are detectable in jazz, though at times it is more implicit, through the exhibition of soaring musical freedom and mastery, through the breaking and bending of musical norms themselves.

Opportunities to Utilize Cartographic Materials with Unit

- ❖ Trace the geographic and cultural origins of the “old things” being recombined
 - Cuisine
 - Musical styles, beats, instruments
 - Fashion
 - Literary archetypes and themes
- ❖ Trace the actual migratory patterns of African Americans
 - From Africa
 - To/Through the Caribbean
 - To/Through the South
 - Gulf Coast
 - Mississippi Delta & River
 - Key Cities prior to Harlem

- New Orleans
 - Atlanta
 - Birmingham
 - Charleston
 - Others
- Harlem and New York

Central Concept of Culminating Assignment: “The Black and Blue Presentation”

- ❖ To give a presentation on the elements of blues and jazz at work in literature and one other form of expression (see the list in the above paragraph). The presentation should cover the following:
 1. An explanation of Langston Hughes’ blues/jazz principle.
 2. An examination of the principle at work in one piece of African American literature.
 3. An examination of the principle at work in one example of another kind of expression.
 4. A detailed description (with primary sources like maps and other cartographic documents) of the cultural journey and evolution of specific cultural items, traditions, and people
 5. Conclusion