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# INTRODUCTION TO CRITICAL THEORY

WEEK 5: CRITICAL BLACK STUDIES AND  
NATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES

# AGENDA

## PART 1

### THE NEW LEFT

Development of disciplines associated with identity (Black studies, Native studies, Asian studies, Women's studies)

## PART 2

### CRITICAL BLACK STUDIES

- Major disciplinary inquiries
- Major figures
- Association with other critical theories

## PART 3

### NATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES

- Major disciplinary inquiries
- Major figures
- Association with other critical theories



# THE NEW LEFT

- "New Leftists were by no means the first Marxists to think of culture as political, but previously the constitutive power that culture possessed—ethnic (or racial) traditions on the one hand, belles lettres on the other—had been ghettoized amongst the Left. 'Proletarian Culture' had never been more than a fantasy; middle class 'progressive' culture, including a refurbished 'folk culture', little more than an uncertain constellation of heterogenous elements. The cultural homogenization endemic to postwar consumerism ironically prepared us to reach outside the known frameworks of cultural analysis to new formulations, even when we did not know what exactly we were trying to define."
- "Young idealists in the early and mid-sixties moving from the campus to the slum neighborhood, were mobilized by the 'rediscovery' of poverty, America's shame. But far more than [Michael] Harrington, they envisioned the poor reshaping their own fate, if aided by a helping hand from activists. 'We would offer ourselves to the people,' Todd Gitlin and Nancy Hollander wrote about the JOIN (Jobs or Income Now) project in the 'hillbilly heaven' of Chicago's New Town; 'offer them a medium for their free expression—a book, an amplification system, a chance to cast their light up from the bottom of this society with the special illumination that comes only from victims.'"
- "'Participatory Democracy', —the talismanic slogan of the emerging New Left—was popularized around this time in and through the Southern struggle. As an idea it was both old and new, simultaneously evoking Black insistence on self-emancipation, the general youth revolt against Cold War authoritarianism, and the age-old American radical ideal of direct democracy by the producing classes. Activists viewed it, moreover, as both means and end; as an organization principle, therapeutic and empowering, it was purposely made counterposed to the 'bureaucratic' Old Left ideal of democratic centralism."



*Marxism in the United States: A History of the American Left* by Paul

# STUDENTS FOR A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY (SDS)

- We regard men as infinitely precious and possessed of unfulfilled capacities for reason, freedom, and love. In affirming these principles we are aware of countering perhaps the dominant conceptions of man in the twentieth century: that he is a thing to be manipulated, and that he is inherently incapable of directing his own affairs. We oppose the depersonalization that reduces human being to the status of things--if anything, the brutalities of the twentieth century teach that means and ends are intimately related, that vague appeals to "posterity" cannot justify the mutilations of the present...
- Human relationships should involve fraternity and honesty. Human interdependence is contemporary fact; human brotherhood must be willed, however, as a condition of future survival and as the most appropriate form of social relations. Personal links between man and man are needed, especially to go beyond the partial and fragmentary bonds of function that bind men only as worker to worker, employer to employee, teacher to student, American to Russian...
- Loneliness, estrangement, isolation describe the vast distance between man and man today. These dominant tendencies cannot be overcome by better personnel management, nor by improved gadgets, but only when a love of man overcomes the idolatrous worship of things by man. As the individualism we affirm is not egoism, the selflessness we affirm is not self-elimination. On the contrary, we believe in generosity of a kind that imprints one's unique individual qualities in the relation to other men, and to all human activity. Further, to dislike isolation is not to favor the abolition of privacy; the latter differs from isolation in that it occurs or is abolished according to individual will...
- We would replace power rooted in possession, privilege, or circumstance by power and uniqueness rooted in love, reflectiveness, reason, and creativity. As a social system we seek the establishment of a democracy of individual participation, governed by two central aims: that the individual share in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life; that society be organized to encourage independence in men and provide the media for their common participation.



# THE END OF CAMPUS RADICALISM

- "We obviously lacked [the Old Left's] analytical (or ideological) roots in socialized labor, and in racial and ethnic community life. But in those absences, the New Left created a powerful utopianism based, like the Civil Rights movement, on the American radical tradition. Tinged—but only tinged—by an updated conception of Marxism, a vision of the future was the one thing the New Left could create: our glory and our doom."
- "Berkeley campus politics, heavily influenced by Civil Rights struggles, displayed the essence of the emergent New Left mentalité. The indelible image, captured by the world media, of thousands of students surrounding an invading police car while Mario Savio orated from its roof, sent a shockwave of excitement through virtually every campus in the United States. The Berkeley students were not fighting for economic benefits, nor the right to vote, nor even for world peace. They were fighting, in the first place, to break down the barriers between the Cold War 'multiversity' and the community, between the California ivory tower and the struggles of sharecroppers in Mississippi."
- "Undergraduate radicals, the true frontline of full-scale mobilization on campus, quickly became our teachers as much as our students. They made the most of the suddenly massive anti-war sentiment and the Student Power fever. One could see them working the dormitories in the aftermath of a police or National Guard invasion of campus, peddling papers, setting up study groups, establishing informal cadre for the next action. Like the Black movement, they had the unmistakable American touch: their organizations were the result rather than the cause of mass mobilization."
- "[the campus movement] practically accomplished one dimension of its goals: disengagement from the war and an end to the draft. But the universitys would obviously not permit a democratic restructuring nor any permanent repudiation of military contracts and research. Students threw rocks, troopers answered with gas, and the campus administrations with an eye on their trustees' and their account books, set themselves (to our way of thinking) on the side of Mammon."

# THE END OF CAMPUS RADICALISM

- "Marxism had in the process gone from playing a simple educational role to providing omniscient guidance on all theoretical and practical questions, and finally (for most activists, anyway) had retreated once more into the shadows as students recommenced their own 'long march' to individual careers and private life. Exhausted by disappointment and all too aware of what dreary alternatives lay ahead, the militants threw in the towel. The vast majority of activists had already quit or had plunged themselves into purely local activities when the national offices closed up shop."
- "Something similar happened to the Black left after King's assassination. Black student movements had begun their turn toward versions of Marxism, but a Marxism adequate to the current American crisis proved most difficult to locate and use. grand political plans, overarching theoretical syntheses were attempted—none met with notable, lasting success."
- "These students felt torn between the unprecedented attention they enjoyed and their widespread commitment to more sweeping change. They believed above all in their own Blackness, and in another era might have remained simply nationalists. Amid mounting protests, they demanded more Black admissions and Black studies; amid increasing disillusionment with their position on the campus, they too looked to Marxism for answers—but not the old Marxism. A member of this generation recalls, 'the closest we came to accepting the fundamentals of Marxism was through their applications in Fanon's, Nkrumah's and Toure's works. To many of us China was a positive yellow blur of 800 million folk...[and] the Soviet Union was just another kind of racist European country.'"

*Marxism in the United States: A History of the American Left* by Paul





# BLACK STUDIES IN LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

- African-American concern about their formal education and their role in that process goes back at least to the creation of the Freedman Schools at the end of the Civil War. During the period of Reconstruction, when there was blatant white control of segregated Black educational institutions, Afro-Americans spoke out passionately for “a stronger, even a controlling voice in the process and institutions of education for our people.”
- During the late sixties and early seventies, there was a substantial increase in the numbers of Black youths in American colleges and universities, two-thirds of whom were at white universities.<sup>8</sup> Their presence on college campuses was clearly related to the demands of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of that period.
- In ways unprecedented in our history, these young Afro-Americans forced us to confront the relationship between what was going on “in the streets” of America and what was going on, and in their view should go on, in the classrooms of U.S. educational institutions. These Black students recognized a relationship between their lives and the lives of the masses of Black people who were expressing their anger and frustration in the burnings and lootings of urban rebellions.
- Black scholars, few in numbers on white campuses, joined with their students.

Today we would refer to our peoplehood, but the sentiment of this statement remains:

... the desire to establish curricula to serve the needs of our people—to provide skills training, to transmit our values, to pass on a dignified version of our history and culture in a world in which our very persons were met (and are met) almost without exception with condescension, scorn, and hostility.<sup>6</sup>

When we turn to the most recent expression of the long-standing drive for Black Studies, that which began in the late sixties, the importance of placing the issue in a political context is extraordinarily clear. For as Julius Lester puts it:

Black Studies carries the burden of its beginning. It was not invited into the curricula of colleges and universities because it was thought to have something new and vital to offer the humanistic body of knowledge. Indeed, it was not invited into curricula at all. It fought its way in through demonstrations in the sixties and seventies. Black studies was born because a man named King was assassinated.<sup>7</sup>

# BLACK STUDIES IN LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

- The beginnings of Black Studies in liberal arts institutions are usually dated with the establishment of an Afro-American Studies Department at San Francisco State College in 1968. However, programs in Afro-American Studies existed at other white institutions before 1968; for example, Cornell University had a functioning program in 1967. Intimately tied to the Black Student Movement, and fueled by the Civil Rights and Black Liberation movements, Black Studies is fundamentally a critique of educational institutions in American society and a set of proposals for beginning the long and difficult process of change in those institutions.
- The Black Studies critique explicitly addresses shortcomings, omissions, and distortions in liberal arts curricula and institutions as they affect Afro-Americans. It also charges that the liberal arts curricula falls far short of what is required to correctly educate white youth.
- The Black Studies critique has taken the form of volumes of written and spoken words: explained before white faculties and administrators, written in the paragraphs of proposals for initiating programs and departments, analyzed in scholarly journals and popular articles, and debated in the string of conferences and symposia that took place all over the United States.
- I suggest that the major points of the Black Studies critique can be summarized in terms of five challenges. These challenges represent a sweeping critique, followed by plans, proposals, curricula, and projects designed to begin to correct certain fundamental problems in American higher education:
  - a. Black Studies challenges *what* is taught in the liberal arts curricula of America's colleges and universities;
  - b. *to whom* and
  - c. *by whom* it is taught;
  - d. *how* it is taught; and
  - e. *why* it is taught.



# WHAT IS TAUGHT

- There is no shortage of examples of these biases in mainstream scholarship. Among the examples frequently referred to are the notion in mainstream scholarship that Black culture is either nonexistent or merely a deviation from middle-class Euro-American culture; and the Moynihanian concept of the Black matriarchy. Another familiar example is the litanies of great classics that always refer to Mozart but never to Coltrane, to Conrad but not to Achebe, to Virginia Woolf but not to Margaret Walker, and to John Stuart Mill, but never to W. E. B. Du Bois.
- The problem with the notions of “objectivity” and “value-free science” is that these sacred fetishes of Western scholarship are in reality, as Lewis King notes, “. . . a metaphor of the collective subjectivity of a particular group in history and the abstract representations of a singular race, sex and economic class”.<sup>13</sup> Thus Black Studies argues for a corrective approach that would negate the myths and distortions inherent in traditional “White Studies” construction of Black people and indeed the world; explore all of history (and her-story as well); consistently address racism; and institutionalize a Black presence in American education.

# BY WHOM AND TO WHOM

- Black Studies during the 1960s and '70s took a critical look at the participants in American higher education. The ideal, often purported to be a reality, is that institutions of higher education choose professors because of their intellectual strengths and ability to contribute to the educational enterprise. Similarly, students are presumably selected because of their demonstrated abilities and intellectual potential. If this is indeed the case, Black Studies proponents ask, then why are almost all professors white male Ph.D.'s of a middle-class mind-set if not origin, who have been trained by scholars of a similar background? If intellectual potential really matters in the selection of students, and not simply demonstrated ability as indicated by culturally biased test scores and good grades in well-financed middle-class white schools, then why are there so few Black and other Third World students in America's colleges and universities? The truth, say the advocates of Black Studies, is that the overwhelming majority of the participants in liberal arts institutions reflect and reinforce the very streams of thought that dominate the curriculum: white, male, and middle class.
- The reality of who teaches and who is taught in liberal arts institutions has led the proponents of Black Studies to make demands for a substantial increase in the number of Black faculty. They also ask that colleges and universities consider some individuals without academic degrees but with a wealth of practical and scholarly experience for faculty positions. Black Studies activists demand changes in admissions criteria, increases in financial aid, and expanded academic and other support services to give more Black students a fighting chance to go to college. Finally, advocates of Black Studies often fight for academic offerings for community residents to be held in community settings.



# HOW WHAT IS TAUGHT IS TAUGHT

- There should be a greater emphasis on student participation in the teaching/learning process, rather than the banking process where the teacher deposits knowledge into students' heads and periodically (at exam time) makes withdrawals. There should be a closer relationship between the academy and "the outside world," in contrast to the traditional model of the academy as an isolated ivory tower. Thus students should be encouraged to engage in field projects and practicums that place them in dynamic interactions with communities. The competitive atmosphere that is so deeply embedded in the American educational process is also challenged. Black Studies proposes that students should be encouraged to engage in more cooperative learning experiences. Finally, the loyalty to disciplines over knowledge, the territoriality of departments, and the sanctity of specialized, indeed professional versus general education, are questioned. The call is for far greater dependence on an interdisciplinary approach. Julius Lester, a professor of Afro-American Studies, exemplifies this approach:

. . . Black Studies cannot concern itself with the University as an apprenticeship system. This does not mean discouraging a student who wants to be a specialist in the field. However, it does not focus its energies on this student, [or] find its *raison d'être* here. The mission of Black Studies is to invite and guide students into human experience as it has affected the lives of Blacks and to examine the variety of ways in which Blacks have responded.

I am not interested, therefore, in creating intellectuals or for that matter in even teaching potential intellectuals. I am interested in that student who will leave the university and go into life, who will, in all likelihood, end up with a job rather than a career. Instead of demanding that this student write a critical analysis of *Native Son*. I ask something harder. I ask the student to learn what he or she feels freedom to be. What is instructive is how often the students have to be convinced that what they think matters.<sup>15</sup>

# WHY TEACH WHAT IS TAUGHT

- The dominant view is that the purpose of liberal arts education is to assist individuals, especially youth, to gain an understanding of the world in which they live. This is a process said to involve an understanding of how the world came to be as it is (history), its physical and natural elements (the sciences), the development and functioning of individuals and societies (the social sciences), and the creative expressions that are unique to the human species (the arts). As they engage in this process, to whom or to what are members of the academy accountable? The dominant view is that scholars are accountable to an abstract notion called “TRUTH,” or more concretely, to an intellectual community.
- Black Studies, the intellectual arm of the Black Power Movement, articulates a very different perspective from that of the “intellectual establishment.” Why study? Not simply to take a place in the world but to understand the world and to actively participate in helping to change it. To whom are scholars and students accountable? Black Studies advocates respond that Black teachers and students should be accountable to Black people as they struggle for a place of dignity, integrity, and equality in American society. By extension, they argue that all scholars and students must be accountable to the best interests of humankind.
- A scholarship that is accountable to human interests is fraught with problems. Who defines these interests? How does one resolve conflicting notions of “best interest”? But on the question of racism, Black Studies advocates are absolutely positive that the perpetuation of this destructive system is not in the interest of any but a small elite.
- Black Studies advocates argue, like C. Wright Mills, that we should strive to be objective, but we should not seek to be detached. Education, they argue, is one means by which Black youth could be prepared to play a significant role in the improvement of the conditions of Black communities. For these reasons, Black Studies proponents call for a strong activist component in the curriculum, and a close and dynamic relationship between the academy and African-American communities.



# ASSOCIATION WITH POSTSTRUCTURALISM

- ***The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*** by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. is seen somewhat as the academic 'beginning' of critical race studies if not for the presence in Legal Studies of similar concerns. Despite being a quite dense, very theory-heavy, and largely not understood text, it becomes a best-seller.
- The book traces the folkloric origins of the African-American cultural practice of "signifying" and uses the concept of signifyin(g) to analyze the interplay between texts of prominent African-American writers, specifically Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston and Ishmael Reed. The title of the text comes from the song "Signifyin' Monkey" by Oscar Brown, recorded in 1960.
- Signifyin(g) is closely related to double-talk and trickery of the type used by the Monkey of these narratives, but, as Gates himself admits, "It is difficult to arrive at a consensus of definitions of signifyin(g)." Bernard W. Bell defines it as an "elaborate, indirect form of goading or insult generally making use of profanity". Roger D. Abrahams writes that to signify is "to imply, goad, beg, boast by indirect verbal or gestural means".
- Signifyin(g) is a homonym with the concept of signification put forth by Saussure wherein the signifier (sign) interacts with the signified (meaning) to form one whole linguistic sign. Gates plays off this homonym and incorporates the linguistic concept of signifier and signified with the vernacular concept of signifyin(g).

# ASSOCIATION WITH POSTSTRUCTURALISM

- The Signifying Monkey is a piece both of historical significance and theoretical significance. First, the text is a totem of African-American literary criticism and a literary history of the Signifying Monkey stories as well as the form of Signifyin(g) that the Afro-American dialect predicates. So, in relation to the academic-historical moment, the text comes out in 1989 and is itself aware of the obsession with theory of the academy. So, first it represents the university at a time when theory is at its peak but is perhaps on a down-turn, or at least self-aware. Moreover, as Gates is of the first generation of postwar and post-civil rights era academics, he represents that the academy has changed: with the creation of afro-american literature departments and the postcolonial theoretical moment upon the academy, Gates represents the amalgamation of the postcolonial and the Afro-American with this book.
- This book is the beginning of Gates' trajectory as a public figure in American cultural criticism. It is proof of his ability to articulate complex ideas of continental literary theory in terms of American contexts. Gates' intervention is in pairing high critical theory and African-American literature, which caused a public sensation. Creating a theory of Signifyin(g), by using Derrida's wordplay device from difference/differance, Gates grounds semiotics in the social sphere (as opposed to text). So, instead of using semiotics in a logocentric way, Gates articulates a structural theory for the social sphere. This anticipates Butler's post-structural theory of gender vis à vis speech acts and the social sphere. His implicit critique of Derrida is that the written word on the page is not taking place in a vacuum but which is part of a cultural context (à la new historicism).
- The second part of the text does close-readings that is now the reading taught in mainstream American literature surveys (Their Eyes Were Watching God, Mumbo Jumbo, The Color Purple). These readings therefore have become almost more influential in the academy than the theoretical interventions in the sense that Gates' readings are the readings of these books. Teaching southern literature and Af-Am literature will mean knowing these readings.





# NATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES

- Also called American Indian Studies, Indigenous Studies, First Nations Studies, or Aboriginal Studies, this interdisciplinary academic discipline began after the Red Power Movement-Alcatraz chapter of activists occupied Alcatraz Island for over 19 months during which time the movement garnered national attention and was able to make known the demands of the American Indian Movement (AIM). Prior to the events of 1968-69, though, there has always been resistance to Native American genocide in the United States
- In the 1930s-60s, uranium mines were set up around Navajo reservations in an attempt to help on-going poverty in Navajo areas; however, it was quickly discovered that the government knowingly encouraged Navajo to be employed in the mines without proper protections despite the dangers that the government knew existed in mining and handling uranium
- Prior to the 1940s, there existed what is today called Indian Termination Policies or Genocide Policies—at the time referred to as 'assimilation' policies—whereby Native Americans were 'encouraged' (by force) by government officials to assimilate into the dominant American society. This included abducting children from Native American reservations and placing them in white missionary schools where they would be forced to learn English, adopt white-sounding Protestant names, and encouraged to go on to American universities. These policies, in a wider scale, ceased federal recognition of tribal sovereignty as established by treaties that date back to first contact. These were seen as genocidal campaigns and direct refutation of Native American self-determination and sovereignty.
- Under the Johnson Administration, he announced an effort to include Native Americans in policy decisions; the House committee on Indian Affairs supported the involvement of American Indians in policymaking; however, self-determination was strictly prohibited. In the words of the committee chairman of the time, self-determination lay in the Congress which was the representative of all the people.

# NATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES

- Drawing from numerous disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, history, literature, political science, and gender studies, Native American studies scholars consider a variety of perspectives and employ diverse analytical and methodological tools in their work. Dependent on the association with any of these disciplines, the inquiries or methods of that particular Native American scholarship will be different. However, of concern for most social science and humanities disciplines are: decolonization, periodization, sovereignty and land rights
- Linda Tuhiwai Smith explains the word “research” is linked to European colonialism, that indigenous peoples are very apprehensive and cautious based on these connections. Thus, the pursuit of knowledge, or 'research' in this sense, is embedded deeply in multiple layers of European and Colonial processes. Colonial definitions and understandings of native peoples were reported to the West and then the West reported those representations were then sent back and attached to indigenous identity. In this way, 'research' is very powerful. Indigenous researchers need to be afforded the opportunity to critique and fine tune these methodologies so that a more accurate representation of their group is assigned. Of significant change to this epistemological concern with research as a production of knowledge about a particular object of study, Native American studies scholars may use tribal knowledge or indigenous forms of knowledge production as research and research methods. This rejection of the Western epistemological concerns in knowledge production is the project known as 'decolonization' or 'decolonizing' academia.



# NATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES

- Philip Deloria explores the historiography of Native American History by focusing on the abundance of work that exists in the canon the lack of diversity among the authors. Through his examination of the system or organization and possible future inclusions and multiplicities of the field, Deloria leads the reader to the question of epistemology. He highlights the idea of *difference* insisting that historians must analyze the how non-native writers have viewed the Native Americans as different and how Natives have viewed those assessments.
- Another major focus of Deloria's, is on **periodization**. He provides four broad historical periods in written Native American History: Frontiers History, Racial Science, Modernist History and Native Narrative. He uses these to account for shifts in historical discourse. He states that, "each suggests changes in social, political, and epistemological positions within non-Indian societies that have helped to produce new kinds of history writing." All of Deloria's research brings him to the conclusion that the most interesting new work in the field of Native American History can come from both Native and Non-Native writers, who have fully explored the work of the other side.



# NATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES

- The work of Gerald Vizenor, Deloria's contemporary, has worked to deconstruct the semiotics of Indianness. His book title *Fugitive Poses* is derived from the idea that the term "Indian" is a construction that replaces native peoples, who become absent or "fugitive". Similarly, the term, "manifest manners" in his other text refers to the continued legacy of Manifest Destiny. He wrote that native peoples were still bound by "narratives of dominance" that replace them with "Indians" -- the idea, signified, or stereotype.
- In place of a unified "Indian" signifier, he suggests that Native peoples be referred to by specific tribal identities, to be properly placed in their particular tribal context, just as most Americans would distinguish among the French, Poles, Germans and English.
- In order to cover more general Native studies, Vizenor suggests using the term, "postindian," to convey that the disparate, heterogeneous tribal cultures were "unified" and could be addressed *en masse* only by Euro-American attitudes and actions towards them.
- He has also promoted the neologism of "survivance", a cross between the words "survival" and "resistance." He uses it to replace "survival" in terms of tribal peoples. He coined it to imply a *process* rather than an end, as the ways of tribal peoples continue to change (as do the ways of others). He also notes that the survival of tribal peoples as distinct from majority cultures, is based in resistance.
- He is a continued critic of Native American nationalism and Euro-American colonialism as endeavors of violence and domination.