Topics to Consider in Unit IV

- *What are some of the most "lethal" boundaries or barriers in our history and education? And – how did they develop?*

- *How did the perceptions of "nation" or "race" develop? And – how do they impede our collective progress?*

- *What are the legacies of human bias? How about "racial" biases specifically?*

- *How do biases develop? And – how do we overcome them?*

- *What are three windows by which we can understand racial history – and how it is expressed in music in the African Diaspora? (And – what is the "African Diaspora"?)*

- *What are the "blues," spirituals, capoeira, or calypso? And – how do musicians speak of their significance and value to us today?*

- *How might an accurate (unbiased) understanding of these genres in the context of American history, heal the biases and ingrained systems of institutionalized racial hierarchy in today's society?*

- *What are the relationships of Blues to Hip-Hop?*

- *What were the roles of "encoding" or signifying in the healing and reclamation of dignity in a racist culture system – such as those of the Americas?*

- *What are some of the similarities and differences of the PAN "African-American" or American experience (as seen through music)?*

- *What is "Carnival/Carnavale" and what does it mean to the people of Trinidad? What is the role or impact of the Calypsonian?*

UNIT IV

Africa–America: Tales and Visions of a Racial Legacy

A Visit to the Land of THEM

All good people agree, and all good people say,
All nice people, like Us, are We, and everyone else is They;
But if you cross over the sea, instead of over the way,
You may end by (think of it!) looking on We, as only a sort of They!
Rudyard Kipling, 1970 [4.1]

"At the heart of the discussion of a strategy of social and economic development, therefore, lies the issue of human rights. The shaping of such a strategy calls for the promotion of human rights to be freed from the grip of the false dichotomies that have so long held it hostage. Concern that each human being should enjoy the freedom of thought and action conducive to his or her personal growth does not justify devotion to the cult of individualism that so deeply corrupts many areas of contemporary life." The Prosperity of Humankind, 2000 [4.2]

Let's suppose the boundaries of humanity (political, national, or racial categories) are exactly the *boundaries of human thought*. Not generally realities at all, but designations of human division, created and implemented by our ancestors. If this were so, then the designation of people by the categories of "Caucasian" or "black," "Asian" or "African," would need to be considered the *creation,* not the reality, of primitive ancestry. However ubiquitous, however entrenched in our education, our textbooks, and our media, each of these designations is still the invention without biological or scientific merit of human cultures and is not founded at all in the reality of the human condition. To develop a more accurate vision of human cultural realities, it becomes essential to simultaneously see and internalize the historical legacy of separatist thinking upon our current perceptions. This is not an easy task; it requires flexibility and fluidity of thought and contradicts the predisposition to **dualistic** (either/or) or **monolithic** (search for singular truth – viewed often as **empirical** or scientific) thinking that pervades many of our human traditions in education and communication.

As concerns music, the multiple methods by which cultures fuse, exchange, blend, and mix is essential to the perception of all music's validity and function. Yet, against a backdrop of centuries of training to see and believe in separation or of avoiding valuable and sustained contact with each other based upon these primitive paradigms, twenty-first century sojourners for truth or equity face a dilemma.

The false dichotomies in the perceptions of our history – from which the paradigms of our present were generated – are centered in the belief in and adherence to the structures of *nation* and *race*. This is … the "land of they." Understandably, before flight, telecommunications, and the World Wide Web, our collective ancestry could hardly fathom viewing history from a global perspective. But had the belief in such a ("they") *land* never existed, had race, nation, and separation of musical genres by these outmoded parameters not been our ancestry, how might we look at human cultures and music today? What vocabulary would we use to discuss our multicultural musical expressions – many of which are the result of numerous exchanges and fusions over centuries?

For now, if we can see that the evolution of our training is generally rooted in the constructs of human separation and racial/cultural division (even if we think this is still as it should be), then as this unit evolves, we will look to the development of alternative visions. Potentially, these alternatives will increase the accuracy of our perceptions, but most importantly, will help us see value in the music of cultures which have most battled these limitations and survived their smothering effects.

What perpetuates the myths of separation to the point that we become inept at seeing the forces of integration and cross-cultural exchange?

What is the mechanism (by which) "country music" is perceptually separated from "rhythm and blues?" or – European classical music seems so distant from rock 'n' roll?

Why is it a challenge (to see the "African" in the "Arabic" – and the "Arabic" in the "French"?)

Many scholarly works (in the last four decades) have pointed increasingly to the perpetual cross-influencing of cultures over the evolution of humanity, including the construction of more flexible (and thus) accurate ways to see cultures as fluid and perpetually changing phenomena.

To believe in culture or expressions (as being "pure") or even mostly distinct is a distortion of the truth … why might we remain essentially entrenched in our perceptions of "otherness"?

Pic. 4.0 *"Blind Blake" (born in 1893) was considered to be an accomplished guitarist, recorded over 80 known tracks, and performed both the blues (Delta-style) and "boogie" guitar (a style of music/rhythm known as "boogie woogie"). The guitar – based upon the Spanish guitar – and before that the Arabic "ud" – became the instrument of choice for many early blues musicians. And the music (the blues) would perpetually be fused with Caribbean, European, and multiple other musical styles as well. So – are either "Blind Blake" or his music "black?"* Photo: Author.

We can't hope to solve the problems that centuries of human wisdom have failed to solve. However, we may be able to make significant in-roads if we examine one single trait of the human condition that has played a role in every unjust, distorted, or exclusionary act of separatist thought over the course of our history: **human biases.**

The Legacy of "Culture Bias"

No one generation or century can be blamed for initiating the habit of separating human groups from each other under the guise of *otherness*. The annals of human discourse, from the Old Testament to the earliest stories of the Egyptians, Romans, Greeks, and throughout ancient China, India, and the Ottoman or Persian empires, are filled with references to other human groups as distinct *tribes, nations,* and, later, *races.* If you multiply this tendency over thousands of years, a few decades of attempting to create more fluid and accurate perceptions is not likely to make a significant dent in the entrenched vision of separatist beliefs. However, if we look at **biases** a bit more closely, we can learn to identify them in our own lives, try to understand their origin, and begin to seek information that will eradicate them. Especially those biases that may be harmful to our personal progress, the enhancement of our families and communities, and the appreciation of music outside the circle of our respect, may be worthy of examination.

Bias (noun): A perception or opinion for or against something that is unfair, partial, or based upon incomplete or inaccurate information.

We will spend little or no time on the biases that are positive or which do not have an exclusionary impact upon our perceptions. Unless a bias toward something demands an exclusion of something else, positive biases toward, say, *heavy metal, or Beethoven,* do not require adjustment. If you hear a new "metal" piece and you already enjoy the genre, you'll probably be interested in the piece. If you already love Beethoven and you hear either another piece by Beethoven or by someone influenced significantly by him, you will likely enjoy the new piece. No harm; no foul!

Pic. 4.1 *Whose vision is this anyway? Because "news" and documentary reporting may be perceived as factual and authoritative in nature, because images of other cultures or their music can be acquired entirely through movies or television programs, it becomes really difficult to know when we are getting an accurate picture and when we are getting an exclusionary or biased picture.* Photo: Courtesy of Sean Locke, 2005.

The *biases* we will address and which we encourage the reader to investigate are those deeply embedded into our perceptions, which induce us to see entire groups of humans as being other than they are or other than they see themselves. Many of these exclusionary biases are taught in our schools, are broadcast in our media, and entice us to devalue other human groups and, subsequently, their music as well.

Pic. 4.4 *Whatever the results of racial bias and categorization, we do not restrict ourselves to music based upon the racial myth, no matter the credence we give it. This younger Canadian musician tries to soak up the wisdom from an elder master of the blues, Freddie King.* Photo: Authors.

Understanding Racial Barriers and Biases: Music in the African Diaspora

> *"History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again."* Maya Angelou

The primary focus of this section is for us to honestly and more fully understand the hidden messages, underlying currents, and tremendous educational potential latent in the African-American Disapora[4.6] through the evolution of its musical genres.

Cultures operate very much along the line of Newton's physical law: *"for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction."* That is, concerning racial biases, for every act that perpetuates a bias and reinforces a stereotype or an unjust hierarchy within a culture, the subordinated culture will be forced to find a balance with their creativity and ingenuity with the same force and investment of that act. And so we ask ourselves, in what ways do repressed cultures find a balance, re-establish their dignity, or counter injustice?

The foundation of this text is viewing humanity through the window of the enormous creativity and depth of expression in music. Across the **African Diaspora,** music acted simultaneously as a means for assimilation (fusion), expressing the depth of despair or highest spiritual beliefs that could emote or counter and heal the impact of injustice, or as a literary tool for documenting and explaining conditions, or regaining control of the uncontrollable. Additionally, creativity born in the face of repression and spawned from a history of thousands of years of evolution in communication, harnessed the literary mechanisms of nonverbal or subtle verbosity and created layers of meaning that only those within or close to the repressed groups could accurately perceive. These educational, cultural, and ultimately musical/literary devices, born of the African-American experience, demonstrate a resilience, fortitude, and creativity that we will attempt to address through the following windows:

- **Assimilation and fusion:**[4.7] We will look at this phenomenon primarily through the *spirituals and work songs* of the North American Diaspora. We will see how the spiritual and emotional sophistication of the African cultures was creatively fused with the requirements of the dominant culture in the Americas, to

spawn not only mechanisms of survival but of miraculous healing benefit to their communities. As a result, these creative expressions would later inspire or influence virtually all musical innovations globally since the close of the nineteenth century.

- **Honest communication:** The "soul" of virtually all African Diaspora music is first and foremost in the honest conveyance of feelings and thoughts. As with all challenges in life, holding pain, anger, or frustration internally, without a means for venting, is destructive. How much more so, when the injustice is completely without merit, of enormous proportions, and prolonged for centuries. We will look at this mechanism through the storytelling genres of the *blues* and the current manifestation of this principle in *hip-hop.* The blues has probably impacted nearly every popular music genre, provoking numerous exchanges across the perceived "color lines."
- **Signifying… or encoding:** When disrespect is so pervasive, dishonor so extensive, and the options for recourse so obscure, a culture will need to ceaselessly exert its energy towards the creation of counter-balancing tools which, on one hand, speak one message to the repressor, while communicating a completely different message to those within the repressed culture. This message, in essence, restores the balance and respect otherwise denied. Fortunately, for Africans brought to the Americas, the diversity of expressive modes they brought with them included numerous communication patterns built on deep networks of non-verbal or encoded mechanisms that had evolved over centuries. To look into the *signifying traditions* in African-American music, we will take a brief trip to Brazil and Trinidad to examine the genres of *capoeira* and *calypso.*

Virtually every African American musical genre prior to the development of music solely for the purpose of entertainment or commercial gain in the twentieth century was simultaneously a means of assimilation and fusion, communication and healing, and a means for the recovery of human dignity. Regardless of where on the continuum of "color" we are or consider ourselves, those of us whose larger cultural structures are the Americas, Europe, Africa, or cultures substantially influenced by these cultures, will have a direct connection to the themes and topics below. Others may need to reflect upon their own culture's system of cultural or racial hierarchy (as doubtlessly they have one), for to some degree the phenomena of action and re-action as concerns the separation and classification of human groups has imbedded itself into cultures in even the most remote parts of our planet.

Since the nature of human creativity is so far more complex and fluid than are the methodologies we use to discuss them, we can at best attempt to emphasize a couple of pertinent thoughts to facilitate the reprogramming of perceptions influenced by a racially divided history:

1. **Racial harmony and an accurate understanding of history** (or sense of who "we" are) can be achieved only through an intense scrutiny of the racial disharmony and a full acknowledgement of the depth of its corrosion of our lives. The adage *"What's done is done"* is pertinent to bias structures only when they have been fully investigated, understood, and altered by methodical action. To *wish* that the issue of race would go away because we are tired of hearing about it is the greatest assault to those who daily experience racism's ramifications. To act upon its existence, then to root out every manifestation of its impact in our character, is by far a more dignified (albeit difficult) reaction.

Pic. 4.4A Photo: Courtesy of Steven Dern.