Black Fugitivity and Fugitive Democracy: radical democratic theory and race
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winter term
Wednesday  6:00-8:50
Bunche Hall, room 4357

Office Hours, Wednesday afternoon (email to make an appointment: gmsl@nyu.edu)

What does “fugitivity” mean as a concept? As a trope, what kind of rhetorical and political work is it being used to perform? How should we assess its value and its limitations? This seminar pursues these broad questions by comparing figurations of fugitivity in political theory and in black studies, especially in work by Hannah Arendt, Sheldon Wolin on the one hand, and Hortense Spillers, Fred Moten, and Saidiyah Hartman on the other hand. In their texts fugitivity gains its meanings by juxtaposing death-like imprisonment and impasse to movement, natality, and aliveness, but they conceive the location, protagonists, and characteristic practices of fugitivity differently. Seeking to preserve “the political,” Hannah Arendt turns to a fugitive natality as the redemption from the social. Sheldon Wolin describes moments of participation and insurgency as “fugitive democracy.” Fred Moten’s black radical tradition refuses both the political and the democratic in the name of protecting the natality he celebrates in black sociality and associates with maternity. His avowedly “anti-political romance” of black fugitivity resonates with the feminist thought of Spillers and Hartman, while posing a profound challenge to any theorizing of the political. How can it be that fugitivity is invoked both to secure and yet also to undo the political? Our goal is to discern the stakes in these differences about sociality, maternity, and blackness, about the democratic and the political. To do so we study texts by Arendt, Wolin, Spillers, Moten and Hartman. We explore debates over Arendt’s intervention into the Little Rock de-segregation struggle, and recent political theory essays on the relation between “fugitive democracy” and “black fugitivity.” We also raise questions about genre and the literary as political theory by reading Harriet Jacob’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl and Colson Whitehead’s Underground Railroad.

Requirements of seminar:
* attendance each week
* preparation and class participation
* expect no more than 100-150 pages of reading a week
* Write a response (roughly 2-3 pages single spaced) to the readings for 4 sessions of your choice
* submit a literature review of 3 books crucial to any of the course themes

Grading:
participation = 20%; response papers = 40%; final lit review = 40%
extra credit possible for submitting additional response papers

course materials:
where possible pdf provided on course site
week 1 - impasse and fugitivity
required:
* Fred Moten & Stefano Harney, The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study (pdf online)
* Hannah Arendt, “What is Freedom?” (From Between Past and Future) (pdf on class site)
* Sheldon Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy” (from Sheldon Wolin, Fugitive Democracy & Other Essays)

week 2 - fugitivity in/as black feminism
required:
* Hortense Spillers, “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words”
* Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: the Grammar....”
* Saidiya Hartman, “In the Belly of the World”

Week 3 -sociality and natality in the political theory of Hannah Arendt
required:
* Hannah Arendt, “The Jew As Pariah”
* Arendt, On Revolution, chapter 2 (on “the social question”)
* Arendt, “Reflections on Little Rock”
* Ralph Ellison, “response” to Arendt (from interview in Robert Penn Warren, Who Speaks for the Negro?)
recommended:
* Danielle Allen, Talking to Strangers (p3-53) (also available in Oklahoma City University Law Review)
* Arendt, “Action” in The Human Condition
* Arendt, “RSevolutionary Treasure” (from On Revolution)
* Linda Zerilli, “Introduction,” Feminism & the Abyss of Freedom

Week 4 - Moten’s Moves: from political death to natality in sociality
required:
* Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness” (South Atlantic Quarterly 112:4 Fall 2013)
* Moten, Stolen Life (chaps 1,2,9-11, 14)
* Moten, Universal Machine (chapter 2)
recommended:
* Best and Hartman, “Fugitive Justice” (Representations, 2005)
* Stephen Marshall, The Political Life of Fungibility” (Theory&Event vol 15#3 2012)
* exchange on Afro-Pessimism, Contemporary Political Theory volume 17
* Judith Butler, Dispossession: the Performative and the Political

week 5: Sheldon Wolin: sociality, commonality and the political
required:
* Wolin, “Political theory as a Vocation”
  “Hannah Arendt: Democracy & the Political,”
  “What is Revolutionary Action Today?”
  “Norm & Form,”
  “Political Theory: From Vocation toInvocation”
recommended:
* Peter Euben, “Fugitive Theory” (Theory&Event special issue on Wolin)
* Wolin, “Tending and Intending” (from The Presence of the Past)
week 6: Alternative Fugitivities I

* WEB Dubois, “The General Strike” from Black Reconstruction in America
* Alyse Eve Weinbaum, “Gendering the General Strike” (South Atlantic Quarterly, Summer 013)
* Romand Coles & Lia Haro, “Re-imagining Fugitive Democracy & Transformative Sanctuary” (Political Theory, Feb 2019)

recommended:
* Huey Copeland, “Glenn Lignon and other Runaway Subjects” (Representations vol 113 #1, 2011)

week 7: Alternative Fugitivities II

* Neil Roberts, Freedom as Marronage (chapters tba)
* Christina Sharpe, In the Wake (chapters tba)

week 8: Fugitivity in/as literary art I: loopholes of retreat

* Harriet Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

recommended:
* Ashon Crawley, “Harriet Jacobs Gets a Hearing”

week 9: Fugitivity in/as literary art II: speculative fictions

* Colson Whitehead, Underground Railroad

recommended:

week 10: Fugitivity in/as Genres of Fabulation: fugitivity as aesthetic practice

we will collectively decide readings for our final session, but I propose these possibilities:

* Norman Mailer, “The White Negro” (1959)
* James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel”
* Irving Howe, “Black Boys and Native Sons” Dissent Autumn 1963
* Ralph Ellison, “The World and the Jug”
* James Snead, “Repetition as a Figure in Black Culture”
* Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark (Preface)
* Toni Morrison, “Home” (from Lubiano, ed The House that Race Built)
* Kevin Quashie, The Sovereignty of Quiet (intro and chapter 1)
* Saidiyah Hartman, Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments (“A Note on Method” and “book one”)