

The Use of Hybrid Technology Projects in Introduction to Africana Studies Course—Joy R. Bostic

I am requesting grant funds to underwrite the development of a new course—Introduction to Africana Studies. I have taught courses in African American studies and popular culture for the last several years. It has been difficult to get students to not refer to Africans who were involuntarily brought here from different parts of West and Central Africa as “the slaves” which in many ways reduces the subjects we study to a labor function and an identity as chattel. In the Introduction to Africana Studies course, students will reorient their perspectives about people of African descent to begin thinking more about the cultures and technologies people of African descent brought with them to the Americas. Using Afrofuturism as a methodological approach, students will build upon these earlier technologies and create new hybrid technologies that address current issues. In this way, students will better understand the ways in which early Africans and African Americans exercised agency and used their expertise, skill and knowledge to contribute to the construction of the Americas even as they struggled against racial oppression and attempts to violently suppress that same agency.

I am developing this course and the idea of hybridity group projects in response to the needs of students in my courses on religion and Black popular culture as well as in my Introduction to African American Studies course. Afrofuturism is one of the themes that has deeply resonated with my students in all of these courses. After the film, *Black Panther* was released in 2018, Afrofuturism became a term and a field that was referenced and explored in popular discourse. What the film *Black Panther* offers is a view of a Black world that is “untouched” by colonialism and one in which adornment, religion and ethnic diversity are ingredients for “advanced” technological agency. While afro futurist themes have been documented in African American writing and history as early as the nineteenth century, writers and scholars at the end of the twentieth century such as Mark Dery and Kudwo Eshun and in the first two decades of the twenty-first century such as Alondra Nelson, Reynaldo Anderson, Charles Jones and Ytsasha L. Womack have presented definitions of Afrofuturism as collections of works and technologies that enable us to reconstruct and recover alternative and counter “Afrodiasporic” histories; intervene in “current political” environments and speculate or engage in “future forecasting” regarding possible futures.

I will incorporate afro futurist methods into my pedagogical framework for the Introduction to Africana Studies course. In the course, I will focus on histories of slavery and oppression, but I will also draw attention to the types of technologies that people of African descent developed on their home continent and brought with them to the Americas. These technologies were adopted, adapted and appropriated in ways that sparked American industries and products. For example, people from the Senegambia region of West Africa developed technologies for extracting organic materials and making indigo dye. West Africans and their centuries-old technologies were instrumental to the development of the indigo industry in South Carolina during the eighteenth century. As students learn about the methods and techniques that people of African descent brought with them and contributed as a part of constructing American industries, education, social structures and politics, I will engage them in exercises of “future forecasting” whereby they can adopt, adapt and construct new or hybrid technologies based on historical and contemporary knowledge of methods, issues and problems. For example, working with the Fiber Praxis Workshop, a local network of artists that creates art which brings awareness to environmental concerns, students in my course will generate new hybrids using visual culture (videos, photography and art), music, and textile art that draw upon these older technologies to address issues such as environmental racism in local communities. By engaging in similar processes of assessment, problem solving and creative critical thinking as did the early Africans and African Americans, students can identify with these previous generations and their generative skills and create relevant technologies which they can apply to current problems. This will enable students to better understand how their own interests and the expertise they are developing can be applied to issues facing local communities and how they can collaborate with community partners and peers to solve problems. By identifying with these earlier generations as actors and agents that have significantly contributed to our current technological environment, students will be better enabled to view Black people as historical and technological agents who have and continue to greatly impact the world in which live.

For this course and the hybridity projects, I am using ideas related to “future forecasting” in Afrofuturism and the Black Speculative Arts Movement (BSAM). I am requesting funding for travel to BSAM meetings to learn more about current issues, cutting edge scholarship and programs, and to network with scholars and activist with whom I might engage in future collaborations. I am also requesting funding for materials and guest speakers for the course itself when I first offer it in 2020.

Founded by Reynaldo Anderson, BSAM brings together, under one umbrella, multiple artists and scholars who organize their work around Afrofuturism, speculative thinking and ethics. Within the last four years, this movement has expanded and BSAM events are held at universities, libraries and community centers across North America, the Caribbean and the African continent. Scholars, artists and gamers convene at these meetings to immerse themselves in afro futurist community, participate in panels, address current issues and speculate regarding near and distant futures. They share knowledge and discuss current issues and programming related to Afrofuturism and Black speculative thinking. I want to be in conversation with participants in BSAM to glean methods and issues and discover cutting edge work that can help us to construct projects in the Introduction to Africana Studies course. It is particularly important that I am able to participate in BSAM events that demonstrate the diversity of Africana studies and technologies. I want to explore the linkages and divergences for the ways in which artists and scholars link Afrofuturism and speculative thinking with activist concerns and analyses of Black oppression and technological developments in different regions of the Afro-diasporic world. In 2019, I will attend BSAM meetings at the W.E.B DuBois Center in Accra, Ghana (August 10-11) for which I am using other funds; The Caribbean Cultural Center in Montreal, Quebec (September 28); and San Francisco State University (October 20). At these meetings, I will be looking for the ways in which hybridity, technology and the arts arise within each of these contexts. I want to explore other possible linkages to these sites and these events, for example, the Black studies movement at San Francisco State, W.E.B DuBois (who published a science fiction short story in 1908) and Pan-Africanism and Black rights movements in Canada. In this way, I will gain more knowledge that I can use in the classroom regarding these Afrodiasporic conversations and bodies of knowledge. I also want to build networks of scholars and artists who I might include on the syllabus, provide Skyped lectures to the class room, or invite to come to class.

In the Department of Religious Studies, I teach religion and Black popular culture. I am also the founding director for the African and African American Studies minor. The courses that I am teaching have informed my current book project *Performing Black Gods: Religion, Ritual and Resistance in African American Popular Culture*. I have also been invited by Routledge to submit a proposal to write a text book on religion and popular culture. As I develop this new course, I will include what I learn from my participation in these meetings in my teaching and scholarship. In future offerings of the course, I also want to include professors from across different disciplines to expand the methodology and hybridity projects to include such methods as coding and subject areas such as math and biochemistry. The methods that I am now developing for this course will shift the way we teach African American studies and the ways in which we connect historical learnings to contemporary issues and problems. The use of popular culture and hybrid projects will help those teaching in the field to make its knowledge base more relevant to students.

The Introduction to Africana Studies course and the hybridity projects will shift the ways in which students view Black identity and history. In order to evaluate how student knowledge and perceptions about African American history and early African identity in the Americas shift as result of the course, I will give a pre-course survey that will assess student views and perceptions at the beginning of the course and a post-project survey that will assess how student views and perceptions have shifted. The shift in student knowledge and perceptions and exercises in applied knowledge will not only better enable students as current and future professionals to use their own knowledge and expertise to create solutions to local, national and global problems with a deeper understanding of the role our shared racial histories have had in producing these problems but also, with a deeper appreciation and respect for the technologies developed by people of African descent, students will also look to increase their collaborations with experts across the African diaspora to create solutions to these problems.

Expenses

Montreal, Quebec BSAM, September 27-28, 2019 (Travel Dates)

Registration	\$ 50
Roundtrip airfare	600
Hotel	600
Ground travel	100
Meals	<u>80</u>
	\$1,430

San Francisco State BSAM. October 19-21 (Travel Dates)

Registration	\$ 50
Roundtrip airfare	460
Hotel	300
Ground Travel Meals	<u>120</u>
	\$ 930

Course Materials	\$ 500
Guest Speakers 3 @ 500	\$ 1,500

Total Expenses: \$ 4,360
Nord Grant Request: \$ 4,360

(Administrator for our department, is Lauren Gallitto, leg47@case.edu, 368-2210)