

FALL 2014

SST 598: Section 1: Robert Johnson, The Devil's Music, and the Blues: An Exploration in Black Southern Culture and Mythology

Wed 4:00-6:30 Barnard 108

Instructor: Dr. Adam Gussow

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

The vexed figure of Delta bluesman Robert Johnson (1911-1938) sits at the center of what is arguably the most persistent mythology of the blues. He “sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads” we are told, in exchange for superhuman prowess on the guitar. Johnson’s purported soul-sale has provided fodder for a wide range of imaginative investments, from novels such as Ace Atkins’s *Crossroad Blues* and Walter Mosley’s *R. L.’s Dream*, to Hollywood films such as *Crossroads*, to early blues scholarship by fantasists such as Rudi Blesh and Greil Marcus. At the same time, revisionist scholars such as Elijah Wald, Patricia Schroeder, Barry Lee Pearson, and Bill McCullough have sharply criticized the myth-purveyors, regrounding Johnson in fresh, nuanced understandings of both his Delta milieu and the way in which his spectral figure has served various constituencies in contemporary America.

The question of Johnson’s devilish soul-sale at some unnamed southern crossroads opens out, in turn, into a larger dialogue about the relationship between black southern religions—Christianity, hoodoo, and voodoo—and the so-called “devil’s music”; between sacred and secular realms within black popular music as a whole. The persistence of African cultural elements (especially the crossroads spirits Legba and Esu) and the evangelizing of slave culture in the antebellum South are a part of this dialogue. Drawing on readings from a wide range of disciplines, we’ll explore all these issues and more.

SST 598 Section 2: The Southern Environment: A Survey of Place and Space

Thursday 1:00-3:30 Barnard 108

Instructor: Dr. Andy Harper

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course will look at the ways the Southern Environment has been discussed in scholarship, literature, film, music, art, and other ways that we uncover together. As part of a broader environmental history survey we will spend a good bit of time discussing place and space in the South. I expect you to reflect on your personal sense of place in classroom discussion, written assignments, and your class project. We will also put the Southern Environment into context by looking at comparative scholarship. Our broad course list includes fiction, nonfiction, historical documents, poetry, film, and song.