ENGL 352:416 Special Topics in Modern American Literature

Black Womanist Voices in Literature and Sound

Tuesdays and Thursdays: 10:00 AM-11:20 AM

Room: Virtual Zoom via Canvas

Professor: Dr. Melanie R. Hill
Virtual Office Hours: Tuesdays from 1:00 PM-3:00 PM
(Virtual Zoom Coffee Office Hours with Dr. Hill)
Location: Hill Hall 530
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Course Overview: “Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.” -Alice Walker

In literary studies, both scholars and students examine various genres of literature from drama, fiction, non-fiction, and poetry. Renowned poet, essayist, and novelist Alice Walker, coins the term womanism, establishing definitive ground not only in African American literary theory and black feminist studies, but its use has also taken an interdisciplinary path in literature, music, and religious studies. In this course, we will explore the roots of womanist theory and the representation of womanist thought in conversation with African American literature, music, and spirituality.

In 1966, famed vocalist, Nina Simone, sings the narratives of four women—one of the most distinct and socially-awakening pieces from her album, *Wild is the Wind*. Just ten years later in 1976, Ntozake Shange released a choreopoem that would mark the ever-evolving trajectory of black women authors and their art. *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide when the Rainbow is Enuf* tells the stories of seven women who encounter periods of struggle, abuse, and denigration at the hands of men. Concluding Shange’s choreopoem is a clause each woman repeats, “I found God in myself, and I loved her fiercely.” In this particular period of the 20th century, black women writers and artists like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Nina Simone, and Ntozake Shange used their literary and musical voices to challenge the invisibility and oppressive structures aimed particularly at black women. In this course, we will explore preachers, musicians, and black women writers from Aretha Franklin and Maya Angelou to Billie Holiday and others from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, investigating how their words and art add to the womanist canon. As both text and performance, prose and poetry, the works of these authors offer an excellent resource for our investigation of black literary studies.

This seminar is designed to give students a profound examination of writing through the voices of black women themselves, and involve students in the kinds of research that the discipline of literary studies currently demands, including: working with primary sources and archival materials; reviewing the critical literature; using online databases of historical newspapers, periodicals, and other cultural materials; exploring relevant contexts in literary, linguistic, and cultural history; studying the etymological history and changing meanings of words; experimenting with new methods of computational analysis of texts; and other methodologies. This course typically involves several main texts that are studied intensively from a variety of approaches. Research exercises throughout the semester will enable and culminate in a final paper project: a scholarly essay of 11-12 pages. The final project must emerge out of each student's intensive, independent research agenda.

In-class assignments and reading response exercises (“Think Pieces”) throughout the semester will enable and culminate in a final paper project: a scholarly essay of 11-12 pages that will be turned in online via Canvas during final exam week at the end of the semester. At the end of the semester, students will also present their final paper project idea in a creative form (i.e. Power Point/Prezi presentation, et al.). Make this presentation creative!

Course Goals:
Comprehend how the canonical works of black women writers reflect the current cultures of African American literary studies.
Understand the concept of womanism, womanist thought, theory, and its application to Black literary studies.
Class discussions, reading responses (think pieces), formal essays, and in-class assignments will help carry students to a higher level of literary analyses of assigned texts.
Students will trace, through assigned literary and historical texts, the development of African American consciousness, attitudes, and ideals.
Recognize in literary and historical texts themes that continue to challenge America (i.e. class, gender and race consciousness, violence, religious values).
Develop and express, formally and informally, perspectives on said African American themes to increase critical thinking.
Use research to augment understanding and to develop analytical papers that demonstrate students' deep investment in assigned texts and writing responses over the course of the semester.

You can purchase the following required texts at the Rutgers University—Newark Barnes and Nobles Bookstore located at the Hahne's Building 42 Halsey Street; Newark, NJ 07102.
Bookstore Phone Number: (973) 353-2200

Required Texts:

Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God
Toni Morrison, Sula
Toni Cade Bambara, The Black Woman: An Anthology
Alice Walker, The Color Purple
Salamishah Tillet, In Search of the Color Purple
Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens
Ntozake Shange, For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf
Gloria Naylor, The Women of Brewster Place
Maya Angelou, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings
Renita Weems, Just a Sister Away
Katie Cannon, Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community
Sonia Sanchez, Shake Loose My Skin
Brittany Cooper, *Eloquent Rage*

(*any short stories that are assigned will be distributed in .pdf files via email to all students*)

(*some texts are recommended reading that will help you throughout the semester; recommended texts are not required texts*)

(for texts that have an asterisk (*), students will read excerpts Dr. Hill will assign, not the whole book)

**Some of our Featured Music for the Music-Making Memoir Section of our seminar:**


Jill Scott, *The Light of the Sun* (2011)


Solange Knowles, *A Seat at the Table* (2016)

Ms. Lauryn Hill, *MTV Unplugged* (2001)


India Arie, *Acoustic Soul* (2001)

India Arie, *Songversation* (2013)


*Albums by:*

*Sade*

*Abbey Lincoln*

*Nina Simone*

*Aretha Franklin*

**Some of our Featured Films and Documentaries:**

*Nina Simone (A Documentary)* (1998) (Duration: 2 hours and 52 minutes) (on Netflix)

*Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am* (2019) (Duration: 2 hours) (link will be provided)

**Recommended Texts:**

Cheryl A. Wall, Ph.D., *On Freedom and the Will to Adorn: The Art of the African American Essay*

William L. Andrews: *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women’s Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*


Zora N. Hurston, *The Sanctified Church: The Folklore Writings of Zora Neale Hurston*


Dolan Hubbard, *The Sermon and the African-American Literary Imagination*

Richard J. Douglass-Chin, *Preacher Woman Sings the Blues*

Kelly Brown Douglass, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*

Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*

Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminisms: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*
Toni Cade Bambara, *The Black Woman: An Anthology*
Imani Perry, *May We Forever Stand: A History of the Black National Anthem*
Houston A. Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*
Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Editor—*Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*
Toni Cade Bambara, *The Black Woman*
Hayes and Williams, *Black Women and Music*
Ntozake Shange, *Lost in Language and Sound*
Trudier Harris—*Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African-American Literature*
Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez, Editors—*Black Performance Theory*
Aisha Durham, *Home with Hip Hop Feminism: Performances in Communication and Culture*
Brittany Cooper, Susanna M. Morris, Robin M. Boylorn, *The Crunk Feminist Collection*
Edwidge Danticat, *Brother, I'm Dying*

**Rutgers University–Newark, Faculty of Arts & Sciences, Spring 2021**

**Academic Honesty:** Any student who violates basic codes of academic conduct—through plagiarism, cheating on exams or assignments, double submission of papers, or any other means, can expect to fail the course and face disciplinary action from Rutgers University.

**Academic Integrity:** As an academic community dedicated to the creation, dissemination, and application of knowledge, Rutgers University is committed to fostering an intellectual and ethical environment based on the principles of academic integrity. Academic integrity is essential to the success of the University's educational and research missions, and violations of academic integrity constitute serious offenses against the entire academic community.

**Academic Integrity Policy:**

http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-policy/

**Email:** Please check your email regularly. For mass communication messages, I will communicate with all of you via Canvas. Feel free to discuss any questions you have regarding the material we flesh out during class with me after class or virtual Coffee Office Hours.
**Virtual Class Attendance Policy:** I expect all students to attend *each* virtual class meeting *on time* with cameras *on*. Please be aware of your attire (casual/business attire) and background for each virtual class session.

**Assignments:** You are expected to read all of the texts and attend class prepared. Class attendance and participation are *essential* to each student’s full development in this course. Please come to class *on time*! I expect each student to attend class ready to delve into each text and discuss the materials in an engaging manner. Attendance is *mandatory*. Any unexcused absences will result in a lowering of your final grade by ⅓ of a grade for each unexcused absence (e.g. from A- to B+). If you cannot attend class due to an illness or extreme emergency, it is *important* that you email me in advance.

**Class Percentages:**
- Think Piece Paper (5-6 pages double-spaced): 30%
- Attendance/Virtual Class Participation/Discussion Board Posts: 15%
- In-Class Presentations/Assignments: 15%
- Final Paper/Project Presentation: 40%

**Assignments this Semester:**

- In-class presentations/assignments will involve one-two students per week submitting a *creative* Power Point/digital presentation that includes 4-5 discussion questions and several sentences/bullet points about what concept you thought was most engaging about the readings for that week. This work will be submitted online via Canvas. All in-class assignments must be submitted to Canvas *before* our scheduled class (Monday) no later than 7:00 PM. All Think Piece Papers must be submitted to Canvas no later than the designated day and time noted on the course calendar.
- Think Piece papers are reflection papers recapitulating in formal prose your thoughts on a particular theme or idea from any of the readings we have discussed prior to the paper deadline. Think Piece papers are 5-6 pages double-spaced. Think Piece papers usually have 2-3 bibliographical sources. Think Piece papers can (though they do not have to) define the foundation for your final paper, if implemented well. If students would rather write on a new topic they did not cover in their Think Piece paper, they can use that topic for their final paper. Examples of excellently-structured papers are available under the “Files” tab on Canvas.
- The writing assignment rubric is also available on Canvas under the “Files” tab.

- Every Thursday, students will submit short reflections (succinct thoughts) on the readings for the week on the Discussion Board. Not only will students’ posts reflect their brief thoughts on an idea they found the most engaging based on the readings, students will also choose a song that reflects each womanist reading. This will build our Womanist Voices Playlist. Each post should briefly evince your thoughts (at least four-five sentences) on a particular theme for the week. Those who are presenting in-
class presentations on Tuesday will not have to post to the Discussion Board on Thursday (the week of the presentation). Each student should post their short reflections on Thursday no later than 1:00 pm. Posts will count towards each student’s participation grade.

In-Class Work: You should come to class prepared to participate in small and large group discussions. Please be respectful of everyone’s opinions, presence, and person in this course. A primary purpose of our discussions is to give you the opportunity to practice developing interpretations of the texts. While you are encouraged to offer differing interpretations, you should do so in a respectful and thoughtful manner.

Final Paper Project Options:

1. At the end of the semester, each student will give a presentation on his or her final paper topic (you can present this in Power Point, Prezi, et al; you can be creative with this presentation!). You have the option of turning in a formal proposal stating the project, its goals, and the research that will underlie it by April 1st (final paper proposals are not required this semester—it is presented as an extra credit option). Your proposal should be as clear and specific as possible, as this will form part of the basis on which I evaluate your final project/paper. In the proposal, you must pay equal attention to the paper project and to the research that scaffolds it. If you want to submit a final paper project for extra credit, you may do so by April 1st.

   • For the critical essay, here are a couple of ideas to use as you’re planning your final paper topic:

2. A literature review analyzing and synthesizing the current scholarly conversation about your topic. Your literature review should not simply be a summary of others’ arguments. Rather, you must make clear the intervention that your essay will make in the field and the thesis of your own argument.

3. A close reading of three non-consecutive passages from the major text you will be analyzing in the final project. These passages should be central to the argument you want to make about that text; that is, rather than selecting random quotations, make sure to choose passages that can help you develop a strong argument about the text. As with option two, your final paper should make the thesis and structure of your essay clear. This option is also a representation of how midterm Think Piece papers should be structured.
Rutgers University-Newark Policies

Rutgers University–Newark, Faculty of Arts & Sciences, Spring 2021

• **Academic Integrity:** As an academic community dedicated to the creation, dissemination, and application of knowledge, Rutgers University is committed to fostering an intellectual and ethical environment based on the principles of academic integrity. Academic integrity is essential to the success of the University's educational and research missions, and violations of academic integrity constitute serious offenses against the entire academic community.

• **Academic Integrity Policy:** http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-policy/

• **Disability Services:** Rutgers University welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. In order to receive consideration for reasonable accommodations, you must complete and submit the Registration Form, schedule and complete an intake meeting, and submit appropriate documentation. If your request for reasonable accommodations is approved, you will receive a Letter of Accommodations (LOA), which you should present privately to the instructor as early in the semester as possible. Accommodations are not retroactive and are effective only upon submission of the LOA to the instructor. Please begin the process by completing and submitting the Registration Form, Applying for Services, available at the website below.

• Applying for Services: https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/applying-for-services

• **Documentation Guidelines:** https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/documentation-guidelines

• **Letter of Accommodations (LOA):** https://ods.rutgers.edu/my-accommodations/letter-of-accommodations

• Office of Disability Services (ODS)
  Suite 219, Paul Robeson Campus Center
  (973) 353-5315
  odsnewark@rutgers.edu

• Religious Holiday Policy: Students are advised to provide timely notification to instructors about necessary absences for religious observances and are responsible for making up the work or exams according to an agreed-upon schedule.

Learning Resources:

• Rutgers Learning Center (tutoring services)
  Room 140, Bradley Hall
Course Calendar (*the Professor reserves the right to change the course calendar at her discretion*):

**Week One**
**Tues. Jan. 19th:**
*First Day of Class*
**What is Womanism?**
- Popcorn Introductions/Icebreaker
- Overview of Syllabus
- What is Womanism?
- Representations of Black Womanism in Music:
  - Read link: [https://wordpress.clarku.edu/wgs200-s17/2017/05/02/representations-of-black-women-and-womanism-in-contemporary-black-music/](https://wordpress.clarku.edu/wgs200-s17/2017/05/02/representations-of-black-women-and-womanism-in-contemporary-black-music/)
  - What is Womanism?: [https://studentaffairs.duke.edu/wc/resource-collection/womanist](https://studentaffairs.duke.edu/wc/resource-collection/womanist)

**Thurs. Jan. 21st:**
*Representations of Black Womanism in Music*
Virtual Womanist Discussion Board Post Day
All Posts Due by 1:00 pm (Thursday)
Read the article below on Representations of Black Womanism in Black Music and post your succinct comments about the article in the discussion board on Canvas. Choose a song that conveys what you think defines womanism. We will add to this list as the semester progresses. By the end of the semester, this seminar will have compiled a Womanist Playlist.
Read link: [https://wordpress.clarku.edu/wgs200-s17/2017/05/02/representations-of-black-women-and-womanism-in-contemporary-black-music/](https://wordpress.clarku.edu/wgs200-s17/2017/05/02/representations-of-black-women-and-womanism-in-contemporary-black-music/)
Week Two:
January 26th:
Representations of Black Womanism in Literature and Music
https://wordpress.clarku.edu/wgs200-s17/2017/05/02/representations-of-black-women-and-womanism-in-contemporary-black-music/
Also read: In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens (article found under Files on Canvas)

January 28th:
Virtual Womanist Discussion Board Post Day on Canvas
All Posts Due by 1:00 pm (Thursday)
Discussion Post Topic: Alice Walker’s In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens, Walker’s creation of Womanist Thought, and the History of Womanist Thought
Article of The History of Womanist Thought found under Files on Canvas
Womanist Playlist Additions: Walker’s Song

Week Three:
February 2nd:
Ebony Minds, Black Voices
The Black Woman: An Anthology by Toni Cade Bambara
  1) Re-Calling the Black Woman
  2) Two Poems by Audre Lorde
  3) Dear Black Man by Fran Sanders
  4) The Black Woman as a Woman by Kay Lindsey
  5) Ebony Minds, Black Voices Adele Jones and Group
  6) The Black Revolution in America by Grace Lee Boggs

February 4th:
Virtual Discussion Board Post
The Black Woman essays
Write on at least one of the essays listed above.
All posts due by 1:00 pm
Bambara’s Song

Week Four:
February 9th/11th:
In Search of Zora
Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God
Thursday: Discussion Board Post on the protagonist of the novel, Janie
Hurston’s Song
Week Five:
February 16th:
Memories of Girlhood
Toni Morrison, *Sula*

February 18th:
Virtual Discussion Board Posts on *Sula*
*Morrison’s Song*

Week Six:
February 23/25:
Lost in Language and Sound
Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*
*Shange’s Song*

Week Seven:
March 2/4:
Gloria Naylor, *The Women of Brewster Place*
*Thursday Discussion Board Post*
*Naylor’s Song*

Week Eight:
March 9/11:
Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*
*Thursday Discussion Board Post*
*Maya’s Song*

Week Nine:
March 16/18:
*SPRING BREAK---CLASS WILL NOT CONVENE*

Week Ten:
March 23/25:
Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*
*Virtual Discussion Board Post*
*Celie’s Song*
*Think Piece Paper Due Friday, March 26th by 6:00 pm*

Week Eleven:
March 30/April 1:
Tillet, *In Search of the Color Purple*
Virtual Discussion Board Post
Tillet’s Song

Week Twelve:
April 6/8:
Womanist Spirituality
Katie’s Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community (we will read an essay from this text)
Renita Weems, Just a Sister Away
Discussion Board Post
Cannon’s and Weems’s Songs

Week Thirteen:
April 13/15:
Music-Making Poetics
Sonia Sanchez, Shake Loose My Skin
Discussion Board Post
Sanchez’s Song

Week Fourteen:
April 20/22:
Brittany Cooper, Eloquent Rage
Discussion Board Post
Cooper’s Song

Week Fifteen:
April 27/29:
Last Day of Class (Thursday)
Final Projects/Presentations: BLACK WOMANIST VOICES IN LITERATURE AND SOUND SUMMIT (Tuesday/Thursday-Creative Presentations)

Readings Days: May 4th- May 5th
Final Papers Due: Friday, May 7th at 8:00 pm SHARP!

FINAL EXAM: FINAL PAPERS ARE DUE ON OR BEFORE FRIDAY, MAY 7, 2021 by 8:00 PM SHARP via CANVAS (LATE PAPERS WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED).