ENGL 352:385 Topics in Modern American Literature

Black Women's Autobiographies

Tuesdays and Thursdays: 11:30 AM-12:50 PM
Room: Virtual Zoom via Canvas

Professor: Dr. Melanie R. Hill
Office Hours: Tuesdays from 1:00 PM-3:00 PM (Virtual Zoom Coffee Office Hours with Dr. Hill)
Location: Hill Hall 530
Phone: (973) 353-5182
Email: mrh197@english.rutgers.edu

Course Overview:

In literary studies, both scholars and students examine various genres of literature from drama, fiction, non-fiction, and poetry. As we take our investigation further into American literature in general and African American women's literature in particular, how do we distinguish memoir from autobiography? From Zora Neale Hurston's, Dust Tracks on a Road (1942), Pauli Murray's Proud Shoes (1956), and Dr. Angela Y. Davis's, Angela Davis: An Autobiography (1974) to Nina Simone’s, I Put a Spell on You (1991), Janet Mock’s, Redefining Realness (2014) and Patrisse Khan-Cullors’s "When They Call You a Terrorist-A Black Lives Matter Memoir," (2018), this course is designed to examine black women writers, activists, politicians, and preachers whose pens and
lives assert social and political freedom for themselves, their communities, the nation, and the world. This course will also delve further in black women's autobiographies through the lenses of film and music with black women writers and musicians Toni Morrison, Nina Simone, and Aretha Franklin, respectively. As both text and performance, memoir and autobiography, 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.
- 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, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942)*


Aretha Franklin, *From These Roots* (1999)


Issa Rae, *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* (2011)


*Glory Edim, *Well-Read Black Girl* (2018)*


Kamala Harris, *The Truths We Hold: An American Journey* (2019)


(*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
Isaac Hayes
Curtis Mayfield

**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*
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**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. Feel free to discuss any questions you have regarding the material we flesh out during class with me after class or 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 ⅛ 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:**
**Reading Response Paper/Think Piece** (5-6 pages double-spaced): 30%
**Attendance/Class Participation:** 15%
**In-Class Presentations/Assignments:** 15%
**Final Paper/Project Presentation:** 40%
In-class presentations/assignments will involve two students per week submitting 4-5 discussion questions and several sentences about what was most engaging about the readings for that week. This work will be submitted online via Canvas. The length of this discussion question assignment is typically two pages. Students have also submitted Power Point/Prezi presentations or creative visuals to go along with their in-class presentations. All in-class assignments must be submitted to Canvas the day BEFORE our scheduled class (Monday) by 5:00 PM. All Reading Response/Think Piece Papers must be submitted to Canvas no later than the designated day and time noted on the course calendar.

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 about your 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 November 17th. 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 November 17th. There will not be a final paper project proposal required.

   • 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.
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• **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
(973) 353-5608  
http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/rlc  
• Writing Center (tutoring and writing workshops)  
Room 126, Conklin Hall  
(973) 353-5847  
nwc@rutgers.edu

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https://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/writingcenter

Course Calendar (*the Professor reserves the right to change the course calendar at her discretion*):

Week One  
Tues. Sept. 1st:

*First Day of Class*

- Introductions/Ice Breaker
- Overview of Syllabus
- Notification of Thursday’s Morrison Assignment

Read Electric Literature Link on Black Women’s Memoir: https://electricliterature.com/the-delicate-balancing-act-of-black-womens-memoir/ (*prepare to discuss full article Thursday*)

Thurs. September 3rd:

- *Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am (film)*
- Chapter One: “On Freedom and the Will to Adorn: The African American Essay” (from Dr. Wall’s book)
- *Come to class with two points of engagement and 2 discussion questions from the film, Dr. Wall’s essay, and the black women’s memoir article*

Read link: https://electricliterature.com/the-delicate-balancing-act-of-black-womens-memoir/

Week Two:  
September 8th:  
**Black Girlhood Reflections**  
Glory Edim, Well-Read Black Girl  
Shaking the Tree

September 10th:  
Chapter Six: “On Women, Rights, and Writing”: June Jordan and Alice Walker” (from On Freedom and the Will to Adorn)
Glory Edim, *Well-Read Black Girl*
*Shaking the Tree*

**Week Three:**
*September 15th:*
**Comedic Memoir**
Issa Rae, *Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*

*September 17th:*
**Comedic Memoir**
Issa Rae, *Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*

**Week Four:**
*September 22/24:*
**Hurston**
Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (excerpts)

**Week Five:**
*September 29th:*
**Memories of Girlhood**
Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*

*October 1st:*
Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name*

**Week Six:**
*October 6/8:*
Patrisse Khan Cullors, *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir*

**Week Seven:**
*October 13/15:*
*Angela Davis: An Autobiography*

**Week Eight:**
*October 20/22:*
*Angela Davis: An Autobiography*

**Week Nine:**
*October 27/29:*
*Assata Shakur: An Autobiography*

*Think Piece Paper Due Friday, October 30th by 5:00 PM*
Week Ten:
November 3/5
Assata Shakur: *An Autobiography*
*Thursday: Start reading Pauli Murray's “Proud Shoes” for Tuesday, November 10th*

Week Eleven:
November 10/12
Pauli Murray, *Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family* (excerpts)

Week Twelve:
November 17/19
*Janet Mock: Redefining Realness*

Week Thirteen:
November 24th:
*Music-Making Memoir*
Aretha Franklin, *From These Roots/Nina Simone I Put a Spell on You*
Music Selections: Aretha Franklin

**THANKSGIVING BREAK: NOVEMBER 26TH-29TH, 2020 (NO CLASS THURSDAY)**

Week Fourteen:
December 1/3
bell hooks, *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood*
Michele Harper, *The Beauty in Breaking*

Week Fifteen:
December 8/10
Last Day of Class (Thursday)
*Final Projects/Presentations: BLACK WOMEN’S AUTOBIOGRAPHIES SUMMIT 2020 (Tuesday/Thursday-Creative Presentations)*

Last Day of Classes: December 10th
Readings Days: December 11th - 14th
Final Papers Due: Thursday, December 17th at 8:00 pm SHARP!

**FINAL EXAM: FINAL PAPERS ARE DUE ON OR BEFORE THURSDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2020 by 8:00 PM SHARP via CANVAS (NO LATE PAPERS ACCEPTED)**