

**Spring 2008
WOST 291B**

Black Women Writers: Feminist Visions from the African Diaspora

T/TH 9:30-10:45am

Course Description:

This course will introduce students to literature written by black women. By exploring the different cultural, political, and historical contexts in which these writers work, we will attempt to define the continuities and conflicts that exist within the vast field of black women's writing. Why, when, and how did a black feminist consciousness emerge? How did racial tensions within the predominantly white feminist movement lead to the development of a separate "womanist"/Third World agenda? How have black men responded to the writing of black women? How does literature by black women challenge negative stereotypes and misrepresentations of black women's realities?

Black feminist texts center the experiences of black women, rather than relegating them to the margins. Such texts demonstrate black women's agency, draw on black women's particular ways of signifying/testifying, and serve as counter-narratives to the pernicious myths which for centuries have circulated regarding the black female body. Whether the authors hail from the continent of Africa, the Caribbean, North America, or from Europe, the texts produced by black feminist writers explore and attempt to define the experience and aesthetic of *excision*; the black female subject is literally and figuratively "cut off" from her birthplace, her mother tongue, her history, and her sexual self. Yet by considering the Atlantic slave trade, (post)colonialism, globalization, histories of rape, and practices of female circumcision, one can see how black women throughout the African Diaspora have attempted to use traditional and experimental forms of writing to reconcile those various "parts" that have been excised, thereby reconstituting the whole.

Course Objectives:

- To establish a set of criteria for black feminist literature
- To develop an understanding and appreciation of the continuities present in (or imposed upon) literature written by black women
- To recognize literary strategies developed by black women in response to their marginalization within society and the literary world
- To explore the possibilities and limitations of literature in articulating the experiences of black women throughout the African Diaspora

Required Texts:

Adichie, Chimimanda Ngozi. *Purple Hibiscus*.
Ba, Mariama. *So Long a Letter*.
Butler, Octavia. *Kindred*.

Danticat, Edwidge. *Breath, Eyes, Memory*.
 Kincaid, Jamaica. *A Small Place*.
 Prince, Mary. *The History of Mary Prince*.
 Orlandersmith, Dael. *Yellowman*.
 Santos-Febres, Mayra. *Sirena Silena*.
 Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*.

All books are available at Food for Thought Bookstore (106 N.Pleasant Street, Amherst, MA 01002; Tel: 413-253-5432). All other required readings are available on Spark.

Films:

A Place of Rage, Pratibha Parmar (1991)
Amistad, directed by Steven Spielberg (1998)
Ethnic Notions, directed by Marlon Riggs (1986)
Ida B. Wells: a Passion for Justice, William Greaves (1989)
Life and Debt, Stephanie Black (2000)
Paris is Burning, Jennie Livingston (1990)
The Color Purple, Steven Spielberg (1985)

Assignments:

1. Students will be required to submit four short response papers; these informal essays should be 3-4 pages in length, and must be typed and double-spaced. Response papers should combine critical analysis with personal reflection on the ways black feminist perspectives are represented in the assigned material. Students should feel free to incorporate outside texts and/or current media events; bonus marks may be earned by citing recommended readings (bonus texts) and/or attending related campus/regional events (i.e. films, guest lectures, performances, etc.).
2. Students will be required to complete an in-class midterm examination.
3. Students will be required to participate in the planning and execution of a campus-wide event, to be determined by consensus. Your involvement in the planning of this event will impact your participation grade for this class. A one-page, informal report must be submitted afterwards, detailing your personal contribution as well as your opinion of the event.
4. Students will be required to submit a one-page proposal, outlining their thesis and sources for the final take-home exam (8-10 page paper).

Weekly Response Papers—due dates:

2/14	3/27
3/6	4/17

Response papers must be submitted by **1:00pm** on the designated due date (no electronic submissions; please submit in class or leave a hard copy in the box outside my office). Late papers will be penalized two points per day; no rewrites allowed. You do not have to cover ALL the material discussed in class; instead, you should select 2-3 texts (a “text” is an essay, novel, story, film, or audio recording) and use these to illustrate your point of view. These are not formal papers—no secondary sources are required—but I do expect correct **in-text citation**, along with proper spelling, grammar, and punctuation. You must include at least one quotation from each text you select. Please consult the Writing Center and/or the MLA guide if you have questions regarding the rules for academic writing.

It might help to think of these papers as a cross between a book (or film, or music) review that you might read in a magazine, and an entry in your personal journal. You should demonstrate 1) your understanding of the text (its form and content), 2) its significance in relation to other material we have (or have not) covered in class, and 3) the way this particular text impacts your understanding of the writing and realities of black women throughout the diaspora.

One bonus point may be earned by incorporating an outside text **in addition to** the 2-3 texts from class. For example, you may attend a performance on campus or read an article in the bonus text folder; if you can meaningfully relate this experience to our conversations in class, one additional point will be added to your grade for that paper.

Grading Policy:

Response papers:	40 points (4 papers x 10 points each)
Participation	15 points
Midterm Exam:	15 points
Thesis Statement:	5 points
Final Exam:	25 points

Grade Scale:

A	>95	C	65-69
A-	90-94	C-	60-64
B+	85-89	D+	55-59
B	80-84	D	50-54
B-	75-79	F	<50
C+	70-74		

***Plagiarism will result in a failing grade for the assignment, and disciplinary action.**

Attendance/Lateness Policy:

Each student will be allowed three (3) absences for the semester. Any additional absences will result in a deduction from your participation grade.

Each student will be allowed two (2) late arrivals to class. Any additional late arrivals will be regarded as absences (two late arrivals = one absence).

Office hours:

I am available to meet with students in my office on Thursdays from 11am-1pm (when possible, please let me know in advance that you intend to come by). I am always available via email, however, and arrangements can be made to meet at an alternate time. **Please contact me ASAP in case of a personal emergency**; students will not be penalized for absences caused by extenuating circumstances, but you MUST inform me of your situation. If you have a documented disability that requires accommodation, please notify me within the first two weeks of the semester.

Reading/Lecture Schedule**Week #1:****Introduction**

T 1/29

Introduction

TH 1/31

Marita Bonner, "On Being Young, A Woman, and Colored" (1925)

Week #2:**Black Women in Slavery**

T 2/5

Ethnic Notions (video); June Jordan, "The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America"

TH 2/7

*The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave Narrative***Week #3:****Neo-Slave Narratives**

T 2/12

Angela Davis, "The Legacy of Slavery: Standards for a New Womanhood"

TH 2/14

Octavia Butler, *Kindred***Week #4:****Woman's Era**

T 2/19

NO CLASS

TH 2/21

Ida B Wells, *A Red Record* (1895)Ida B Wells, *A Passion for Justice* (video)**Week #5:****Harlem Renaissance**

T 2/26

Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South*

TH 2/28

Zora Neale Hurston, "Drenched in Light" (1924); poetry

Week #6:**Black & Blue**

T 3/4

Wild Women Don't Have the Blues (video)

TH 3/6

*The Color Purple***Week #7:****Feminism, Motherhood, & the Motherland**

T 3/11

Mariama Ba, *So Long a Letter*

TH 3/13 MID-TERM EXAM

Week #8:

T 3/18 BREAK
TH 3/20 BREAK

Week #9: Black Women & Rage

T 3/25 *A Place of Rage* (video)
TH 3/27 Combahee River Collective, "Statement"
June Jordan, "Poem About My Rights"
Ntozake Shange, "comin to terms"

Week #10: The Caribbean

T 4/1 *Life & Debt* (video)
TH 4/3 Louise Meriwether, "A Happening in Barbados"
Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place*

Week #11: The Color Question

T 4/8 Dael Orlandersmith, *Yellowman*
Kiri Davis, *A Girl Like Me* (online film)
TH 4/10 Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory"

Week #12: Protecting the Black (W)hole

T 4/15 Edwidge Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*
TH 4/17 *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

Week #13: The Colonized Tongue

T 4/22 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*
TH 4/24 *Purple Hibiscus*

Week #14: Bending Gender

T 4/29 *Paris Is Burning* (video)
TH 5/1 Mayra Santos-Febres, *Sirena Silena*

Week #15: Exit Interviews

T 5/6 Individual appointments to discuss final paper
TH 5/8 same

Week #16:

Conclusions

T 5/13

END OF SEMESTER