

**WGSS 297: BLACK FEMINISM AND ENVIRONMENTALISM**  
**SPRING 2017 | T/TH 1:00PM – 2:15PM**  
**SOUTH COLLEGE W101**

**INSTRUCTOR:** Carlyn Ferrari  
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**OFFICE HOURS:** Tues. 2:30pm – 4:30pm and by appointment  
**OFFICE LOCATION:** W406

*“If people were flowers, an hour is all I’d ask of them—and you—if people were flowers”*  
-Anne Spencer

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### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course is designed to serve as an interdisciplinary study of Black feminist literature and environmentalism. We will examine Black women's use of natural world imagery and locate Black women's natural world writings as a legitimate site of Black feminist knowledge production. This course will also provide students with a history of Black environmental thought and environmental racism through a Black feminist lens and explore the relationship between Black women's poetics, gender, race, and space.

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### **LEARNING OUTCOMES**

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Identify and articulate major themes that address how Black women theorize the environment;
- Possess a working knowledge of the history of Black environmental thought and environmental racism;
- Assess processes that gender and racialize the natural world;
- Recognize the environment as a key site for Black feminist engagement

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### **REQUIRED TEXTS**

- Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*
- Dionne Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here* and *Land to Light On*
- Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones*
- Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

*\*Note: All other texts will be made available through Moodle*

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### **COURSE SCHEDULE & READING LIST**

**\*NOTE:** *This syllabus represents current course plans and objectives and is a working document. The syllabus may be subject to amendment. Such changes, communicated clearly, are not unusual and should be expected. The changes will be slight and may occur if a text needs shifting.*

#### **WEEK 1**

Jan. 23

- Introduction

Jan. 25

- Dorceta E. Taylor, “Women of Color, Environmental Justice, and Ecofeminism” in *Ecofeminism: Women, Nature, Culture*
- Camille T. Dungy, “Tales from a Black Girl on Fire, or White I Hate to Walk Outside and See Things Burning” from *Colors of Nature: Culture, Identity, and the Natural World*
- Robert D. Bullard, “Confronting Environmental Racism in the Twenty-First Century” from *Colors of Nature: Culture, Identity, and the Natural World*
- bell hooks, “Earthbound: on solid ground” from *Colors of Nature: Culture, Identity, and the Natural World*

### WEEK 2

Jan. 30

- \*Carolyn Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces* (e-book available through library); preface – chapter 4

Feb. 1

- \*Chapter 5 - end

### WEEK 3

Feb. 6

- \*Dolores Williams, “Sin, Nature, and Black Women’s Bodies” from *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*
- \*Shamara Shantu Riley, “Ecology Is a Sistah’s Issue, Too”: The Politics of Emergent Afrocentric Ecowomanism” from *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*
- J.T. Roane, “Improve Your Body—and the Earth—by Rejecting the Theory of Dominion”
- Alice Walker, “Womanism” and “Democratic Womanism”

Feb. 8

- Film screening, *The War We Are Living*
- TedTalk, “Greening the Ghetto”

\*Note: Class will not be held this day, so you will watch these videos on your own. A 350-word forum response post will be due to Moodle by midnight. The forum post will count as your attendance and participation for the day.

### WEEK 4

Feb. 13

- \*Katherine McKittrick, “Introduction: Geographic Stories” and Chapter 1, 2, and 5 from *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (e-book through library)

Feb. 15

- Anne Spencer poetry selections:  
“Any Wife to Any Husband”; “Lines to Nasturtium (A Lover Muses)”; “[Earth, I Thank You]”; “He Said”; “1975”
- \*Evie Shockley, “Protest/Poetry: Anne Spencer’s ‘Raceless’ Verse” from *Renegade Poetics*
- **1-page project proposal due**

### WEEK 5

Feb. 20

- Dionne Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*; beginning – “Verlia, flying”

Feb. 22

- Dionne Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*; “Verlia, flying” - end

**WEEK 6**

Feb. 27

- Dionne Brand, *Land to Light On*; beginning – “Dialectics”

March 1

- Dionne Brand, *Land to Light On*; “Dialectics – end”
- \*Cheryl Lousley, “Dionne Brand’s Environmental Poetics”

**WEEK 7**

March 6

- \*Kimberly R. Ruffin, “Introduction of the Trees: Recognizing Ecological Burden and Beauty” from *Black on Earth: African American Eco-Literary Traditions* (e-book through library)

March 8

- No class: take-home midterm

**WEEK 8**

March 20

- Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; chapters 1-12

March 22

- Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; chapters 12-end
- **Annotated Bibliography Due**

**WEEK 9**

March 27

- Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
- \*Scott Hicks, “Zora Neale Hurston: Environmentalist in Southern Literature.” from “*The Inside Light*”: *New Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston*
- \*Gurleen Grewal, “Beholding a Great Tree in Leaf: Eros, Nature, and the Visionary in Their Eyes Were Watching God.” from *The Inside Light*: *New Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston*

March 29

- \*Dianne D. Glave, “Black Environmental Liberation Theology” from “*To Love the Wind and Rain*”: *African Americans and Environmental History*
- \*Melanie Harris, “Ecowomanism: Black Women, Religion, and the Environment”
- PLEASE BRING YOUR COPY OF THE COLOR PURPLE TO CLASS TODAY!

**WEEK 10**

April 3

- Alice Walker, “Womanism”
- Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (read about 75 pages per class)

April 5 – no class

**WEEK 11**

April 10

- Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (read about 75 pages per class)

April 12

- Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (read about 75 pages per class)

**WEEK 12**

April 19

- \*Melissa Harris-Perry, “Disaster” from *Sister Citizen*

- Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones*; “The First Day – The Third Day”

April 24

- Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones*; “The Fourth Day – “The Sixth Day”

**WEEK 13**

April 26

- Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones*; “The Seventh Day – end”

May 1

- Final project presentations

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS, GUIDELINES & POLICIES**

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**SAFE SPACE STATEMENT:** As your instructor, I am committed to creating and fostering a safe learning environment for all students. Please feel free to let me know, at any point during the semester, how we can work together to make the classroom a safe space for you.

**COURSE CONTENT STATEMENT:** In this course, we will be discussing the lived experiences of black women. We will not be debating whether issues of racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of oppression are “real” or whether they impact black women’s lived experiences. Instead, this course will analyze *how* such social categories and differentiators impact black women. If you are unclear or concerned about this statement, please speak with me.

**PARTICIPATION: THIS IS A HIGH-PARTICIPATION COURSE, AND YOUR PARTICIPATION IS MANDATORY.** Class participation will be a major component of this course (10%); therefore, it is important to complete the assigned readings *before* each class. If you are present, it is assumed that you have read the assigned readings and are prepared to discuss them. Nerves can often get in the way of speaking in class, but please keep in mind that you are not being graded on the “rightness” or “wrongness” of your answers. I invite you to share your insights, pose questions, and relate the classroom discussion to contemporary social or political issues.

Please note that I will provide some introductory lecture in order to contextualize material within broader historical and contemporary frameworks, but for the most part I will be eliciting and orienting class discussion by posing questions and suggesting themes and perspectives. It is imperative that you prepare for each class by doing, AT THE MINIMUM, the required reading for that class period.

Assigned texts must *always* be brought to class each class period (electronic copies are acceptable as well). **IF A STUDENT DOES NOT BRING THE ASSIGNED READINGS TO CLASS, THEY WILL RECEIVE AN ABSENCE FOR THE DAY.**

**ATTENDANCE POLICY: DO NOT SKIP CLASS!** You are allowed two unexcused absences. You will lose one course letter grade for every class you miss beyond two (2) absences. If you miss three classes and have only two excused absences, you will be penalized. Excused absences will be granted if the student contacts the instructor *prior* to class. Your presence and active participation are essential to your success in this course. It is expected that all students will attend scheduled classes on time (more than 15 minutes late without prior notification will result in an absence). Students must also be prepared to discuss assigned readings and participate in any in-class activities. Please note that if you are not in class, you cannot actively participate! For example, if you contribute regularly but irregularly attend class, you should not expect to earn the same grade as students who do participate and come to class. Furthermore, if you come to class regularly but do not participate at all, this would equal a grade in the “D” range for the participation portion of your grade

**LATE ASSIGNMENTS:** Our course schedule should be strictly followed. The purpose of the course organization is to give each student ample time to complete all assignments and provide meaningful feedback. Please make every effort to complete all assignments on time. Late assignments will be penalized half a letter grade for each day past the original due date. If due to extenuating circumstances assignment deadlines cannot be met, please inform me prior to the deadline. Extensions will be granted on a case-by-case basis. The key here is *communication before the assignment is due, not after.*

**CLASSROOM ETIQUETTE:** As we study and discuss critical and sometimes contentious subject matter, we will adhere to a policy of mutual respect. Please familiarize yourself with the UMass [Code of Student Conduct](#) and the [Affirmative Action and Nondiscrimination Policy Statement](#). Please remember to turn off or silence cell phones (vibrate does not count!). Cell phones cannot be in use while class is in session. If students are seen using cell phones during class, they will be given an absence for the day.

**LEARNING ACCOMMODATIONS AND ADJUSTMENTS:** Students who need special accommodations or adjustments must provide official documentation from [Disability Services](#). All accommodations must be arranged in advance. I need to hear from anyone who has a disability that may require some modification of seating, assignments, or other class requirements so that I can support your learning needs. If you need accommodations, please see me after class or during my office hours.

**PLAGIARISM AND CHEATING: JUST DO NOT DO IT!** Plagiarism, cheating, and other forms of academic misconduct are prohibited. Any academic integrity/academic dishonesty violations will result in a grade of “F” for the assignment/examination. A second violation of the academic integrity/academic dishonesty policy will result in a grade of “F” for the course. All University rules governing plagiarism must be observed. Review UMass’s **Academic Honesty Policy** here: [Academic Honesty Policy and Appeal Procedure](#)

**A NOTE ABOUT TRIGGER WARNINGS:** Be warned, the materials studied in this class often feature, as the movie warnings say, adult language and situations. Please come talk to me if you have any concerns about the course content or need specific trigger warnings.

**PLEASE TALK TO ME—I DO NOT BITE:** I will be available during my office hours and by appointment to address your concerns with the class and assignments. I encourage you to come see me if you feel you have not been offered a chance to participate in class discussion, you are troubled by a particular assignment, you would like to talk more with me about an issue raised in class, or you have concerns about your performance in the course. Most importantly, please do not wait until the end of the semester to speak with me.

#### **GRADE DISTRIBUTION**

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**Class Participation—10%**

**Attendance—10%**

**Annotations—30%**

**Midterm—20%**

**Final Project - 30%**

A	94-100%	C	74-76%
A-	90-93%	C-	70-73%
B+	87-89%	D+	67-69%
B	83-86%	D	63-66%
B-	80-82%	D-	60-62%
C+	77-79%	F	<60%

## ASSIGNMENTS

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1. **Annotations:** five times during the semester you will be asked to write a 1-page, single spaced annotation of one of the assigned scholarly, non-fiction texts. These annotations are exercises that will sharpen your writing skills, and they will help you identify and understand the authors' major arguments. You may write an annotation for any text marked with asterisk (\*). Students will sign up for their preferred readings and should come to class prepared to share elements of their annotations. Please refer to the guidelines at the end of the syllabus. Annotations are due the day the text is assigned by midnight.
2. **Midterm Take-home Exam:** Detailed instructions will be provided the week prior to the exam.
3. **Final Project:** Students will also complete a final project research paper (8-10 pages) that will include a research project and a brief in-class presentation. Detailed instructions will be provided. A 1-page proposal will be due **February 15th**. An [annotated bibliography](#) will be due **March 22**.

### ANNOTATION GUIDELINES

Work to:

- Be specific (about who, what, where, when, and why)
- Identify important themes
- Utilize key-words the author employs
- Explain direct quotations
- Give concrete examples
- Offer evaluations that directly respond to the main arguments of the author

Avoid:

- Summarizing or describing the text
- Generalizing
- Referring to various groups (eg racialized or gendered groups) as though they are all homogenous (the same in nature) or ahistorical (unchanging over time)—in other words, avoid making assumptions about any given person or group
- Long or excessive quotations
- Framing your annotation around your own reaction to the author – *be objective*
- Commenting on whether you “liked” or “disagreed with” the author

Important Questions to Answer:

1. What was the primary goal or thesis of the reading? In other words, what is the author arguing?
2. How does the author make their argument? What type of evidence is used in support of their claims?
3. What does this text tell us about how Black women theorize the natural world and/or environmental concerns?
4. What questions/thoughts do you have about the text that you would like the group to discuss? These one or two ideas do not need to be in your annotation, but come prepared to share them.