

## **WGSS 692: Contemporary Black Feminist Thought**

**Fumi Okiji**

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**Th 1-3:30pm**

**South College, W465**

**Office hours: Tuesdays, 12-1:30pm, South College, W473**

### **Sensitivity, respect**

This course consists in large part of discussions about gender, sexuality, race and class. You will often be called upon to engage in conversations that may cause some participants discomfort or pain. Sensitivity and respect for all students is vital. I will not tolerate purposeful denigration by any individual. By the same token, we are continually learning, and opening ourselves to that which is unfamiliar. I would appreciate all participants to treat genuinely inadvertent lapses as such. Please know you can always come to see me (or email me) if you have any concerns or require guidance.

### **Names, pronouns**

The class should address you by your preferred name and gender pronoun. Please advise on such, and on any pronunciation inaccuracies, early in the semester so that I and the class may take note.

### **Atypical abilities, additional needs**

The University of Massachusetts Amherst is committed to making reasonable, effective and appropriate accommodations for students with additional needs and help create a barrier-free campus. If you have additional needs and require accommodations, please register with Disability Services (161 Whitmore Administration building; phone 413-545-0892) to have an accommodation letter sent to your home faculty. Information on services and materials for registering are also available on their website [www.umass.edu/disability](http://www.umass.edu/disability).

### **Attendance, participation**

Group study is a core component of this seminar. It is expected that students come to each session prepared to discuss the assigned reading for the week. You will be graded on your participation in discussions (including whole class and small groups discussion). For this reason, among others, it is essential that you attend each week. Poor attendance will significantly lower your grade, regardless of how you perform on other metrics.

### **Facilitating**

I will lead the first three weeks of discussions (our consideration of foundational texts by Hartman, Spillers and Wynter). Following this, each week two students will work together to facilitate our study of the scheduled text. I will provide guidance on this. I also encourage you to come and see me, or email me, even if you feel you do not require extra assistance.

### **Response papers**

You will submit three short (2-3pp) papers during the course of the semester. One paper should be in response to the foundational texts that we will read during the first three weeks (either focusing on a particular text or theme, or taking a more broad, overarching approach). **This is due 28<sup>th</sup> September.** Another paper will help provide the basis of the session you will facilitate. **This paper is due within a week of your facilitation.** The last should be in response to a text that you were not allocated for facilitation (and a text not by Hartman, Spillers or Wynter). **This paper should be submitted within ONE WEEK following the associated session. For example if you wanted to write a response to Kara Keeling's *The Witch's flight* it would be due on the 18<sup>th</sup> October. Please seek clarification as necessary.**

### **Final essay**

I encourage you to come and see me during office hours to discuss your intentions, as early as possible. **The final essay is due on 12<sup>th</sup> December.**

### **Presentations**

All students are expected to produce a presentation. I encourage collaborative work involving groups of no more than three, although individual presentation is fine. Please feel free to treat this component of your coursework as a chance to experiment with alternative forms of representation. Students are advised to begin planning mid-term, and to seek guidance, particularly if exploring alternative formats.

### **EVALUATION**

Attendance and participation 20%  
Seminar facilitation 20%  
Response papers (3) 20%  
Presentation 15%  
Essay 25%

### **Week one to three: Foundational texts: Wynter, Hartman, Spillers**

#### **Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> September**

Hartman, Saidiya. **“Introduction” AND “Redressing the pained body: Towards a theory of practice” AND “Seduction and the ruses of power.”** In *Scenes of subjection: Terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth-century America*. Oxford University Press, 1997. - PDF

#### **Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> September**

Spillers, Hortense. “Interstices: A small drama of words.” *Pleasure and danger: Exploring female sexuality* (1984): 73-100. - PDF

Spillers, Hortense. "Mama's baby, papa's maybe: An American grammar book." In *Black, white, and in color: Essays on American literature and culture*. University of Chicago Press, 2003. – PDF TO BE PROVIDED

Spillers, Hortense. "All the Things You Could be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother": Psychoanalysis and Race." *boundary 2*, 23: 3, 1996, 75-141. - PDF

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### **Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> September**

Wynter, Sylvia. "Unsettling the colonality of being/power/truth/freedom: Towards the human, after man, its overrepresentation—An argument." *CR: The new centennial review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257-337. - PDF

**!!! 1<sup>ST</sup> RESPONSE PAPER DUE ON 28<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER !!!**

### **Week four to eleven: Contemporary black feminist thought**

### **Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> September**

Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and being*. Duke University Press, 2016. – ON RESERVE LIST

Christina Sharpe interrogates literary, visual, cinematic, and quotidian representations of Black life that comprise what she calls the "orthography of the wake." Activating multiple registers of "wake"—the path behind a ship, keeping watch with the dead, coming to consciousness—Sharpe illustrates how Black lives are swept up and animated by the afterlives of slavery, and she delineates what survives despite such insistent violence and negation.

### **Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> October**

Musser, Amber Jamilla. *Sensational flesh: Race, power, and masochism*. NYU Press, 2014. EBOOK

In everyday language, masochism is usually understood as the desire to abdicate control in exchange for sensation—pleasure, pain, or a combination thereof. Yet at its core, masochism is a site where power, bodies, and society come together. *Sensational Flesh* uses masochism as a lens to examine how power structures race, gender, and embodiment in different contexts.

### **Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> October**

Keeling, Kara. *The Witch's flight: The Cinematic, the black femme, and the image of common sense*. Duke University Press, 2007. EBOOK

Kara Keeling contends that cinema and cinematic processes had a profound significance for twentieth-century anticapitalist Black Liberation movements based in the United States. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze's notion of "the cinematic"—not just as a phenomenon confined to moving-image media such as film and television but as a set of processes involved in the production and

reproduction of social reality itself —Keeling describes how the cinematic structures racism, homophobia, and misogyny, and, in the process, denies viewers access to certain images and ways of knowing.

### **Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> October**

Brown, Kimberly Juanita. *The Repeating body: Slavery's visual resonance in the contemporary*. Duke University Press, 2015. EBOOK

Haunted by representations of black women that resist the reality of the body's vulnerability, Kimberly Juanita Brown traces slavery's afterlife in black women's literary and visual cultural productions. Brown draws on black feminist theory, visual culture studies, literary criticism, and critical race theory to explore contemporary visual and literary representations of black women's bodies that embrace and foreground the body's vulnerability and slavery's inherent violence.

### **Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> October**

Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. *Spill: Scenes of black feminist fugitivity*. Duke University Press, 2016. EBOOK

In *Spill* Alexis Pauline Gumbs presents a commanding collection of scenes depicting fugitive Black women and girls seeking freedom from gendered violence and racism. In this poetic work inspired by Hortense Spillers, Gumbs offers an alternative approach to Black feminist literary criticism, historiography, and the interactive practice of relating to the words of Black feminist thinkers.

### **Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> November**

McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic grounds: Black women and the cartographies of struggle*. U of Minnesota Press, 2006. EBOOK

*Demonic Grounds* explores how black women's geographies are meaningful sites of political opposition, moving between past and present, archives and fiction, theory and everyday, to focus on places negotiated by black women during and after the transatlantic slave trade.

### **Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> November**

Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas viscus: Racializing assemblages, biopolitics, and black feminist theories of the human*. Duke University Press, 2014. EBOOK

*Habeas Viscus* focuses attention on the centrality of race to notions of the human. Alexander Weheliye develops a theory of "racializing assemblages," taking race as a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans. This disciplining, while not biological per se, frequently depends on anchoring political hierarchies in human flesh. The work of the black feminist scholars Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter is vital to Weheliye's argument.

**Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> November**

Broeck, Sabine. *Gender and the abjection of blackness*. SUNY Press, 2018. – ON RESERVE LIST

Sabine Broeck argues that gender studies as a mostly white field has taken insufficient account of Black contributions, and that more than being an ethnocentric limitation or blind spot, this has represented a structural anti-Blackness in the field. Engaging with the work of Black feminist authors Sylvia Wynter, Hortense Spillers, and Saidiya Hartman, Broeck critiques a selection of canonical white gender studies texts to make this case.

**Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> November**

NO CLASS

**Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> November**

PRESENTATIONS, 10 MINS TALK, FOLLOWED BY DISCUSSION

**Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> December**

PRESENTATIONS, 10 MINS TALK, FOLLOWED BY DISCUSSION

**!!! FINAL ESSAY DUE: TUESDAY 12<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER !!!**