

WGSS 395W: Contemp. Black Women Writers  
Spring 2016  
109 Bartlett Hall  
Tues/Thurs 1-2:15

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Hours: Tues/Thurs 2:30-3:30, by appointment

## Contemporary Black Women Writers

### Course Description:

This course examines works of fiction, drama, poetry, and criticism published by black women writers from 1970 to the present. We will ask how these writers sustain a culturally specific literary tradition in the "post-Civil Rights" era, and we will analyze the strategies through which they propose new understandings of blackness, gender, sexuality, community, and artistry. While we will interpret these works in light of socio-historical developments, we will also attend to the ways these authors create new conceptual realities through their imaginative and critical works.

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### Required texts (available at Amherst Books):

1. Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973) / ISBN 978-1400033430 (Vintage pbk, 2004)
2. Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1976) / ISBN 978-0684843261 (Scribner, 1997)
3. Audre Lorde, *Zami* / ISBN 978-0895941220 (The Crossing Press, 1982)
4. Andrea Lee, *Sarah Phillips* (1984) / ISBN 978-1555531584 (Northeastern, 1993)
5. Lucille Clifton, *Blessing the Boats* / ISBN 978-1880238882 (BOA Editions, 2000)
6. Lynn Nottage, *Intimate Apparel / Fabulation* (2003 / 2004) / ISBN 978-1559362795 (Theatre Communications Group, 2006)
7. Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* / ISBN 978-1555976903 (Graywolf, 2014)
8. Janet Mock, *Redefining Realness* / ISBN 978-1476709130 (Atria Books, 2014)
9. Mecca Jamilah Sullivan, *Blue Talk and Love* / ISBN 978-1626011625 (Riverdale Avenue Books, 2015)

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<b>Course Requirements</b>	<b>Percentage of Final Grade</b>
Midterm paper, 5-6 pages	20%
Group presentation, 10 minutes	20%
Presentation abstract and outline	10%
Final paper, 7-8 pages	30%
Participation*	20%

\* Please be advised that participation does not just refer to speaking in class, but more specifically to engaging in thoughtful, respectful exchanges with other students; getting to class on time; being alert during class; reading each assignment; handing in papers the day they are due. Failure to do the above will hurt your grade.

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### **Attendance:**

You are permitted two absences without penalty. These are your business; I do not want you to tell me why you miss class. You are responsible for keeping track of your own absences; do not ask me how many classes you have missed. Please do not ask me *what* you have missed; instead, find out from another student. Your final grade will drop a third of a letter grade upon your third absence, and will continue to drop a third of a letter grade upon each subsequent absence (e.g., on the third absence a B+ would drop to a B, on the fourth absence it would drop to a B-, etc.).

### **Lateness:**

I take attendance within the first 5 minutes of class. If you arrive after that, please come see me after class to make sure I mark you as having been present. If you sleep during class or arrive very late without notifying me ahead of time that you will be late, you will be marked absent.

### **Meeting with Me:**

I am happy to meet with you outside of class to discuss assignments or any other course-related issues. Please let me know if you are planning to come to my office hours, Tues/Thurs, 2:30-3:30 (457 Bartlett). If I don't expect anyone to be there, I might not be there! If that time frame doesn't work for you, let me know and we'll arrange another time to meet.

### **Technology:**

The use of laptops and related technologies (e.g., smart phones) is prohibited. I ask that you turn off or silence cell phones prior to the start of class, and I insist that you refrain from texting during class time. Failure to do these things will result in a lowered grade.

### **Essays:**

Writing assignments are relatively short because we are aiming for quality over quantity in this course. Essays will be penalized by one-third of a letter grade for each day they are late. If you send me an essay after class on the day it is due, it is still considered late. I do not read drafts or accept rewrites—but, again, I am always glad

to meet with you to discuss your work. You will receive detailed prompts for these papers 2 weeks before their respective due dates.

**Format for essays:**

All written work must be typed in 12-point, Times New Roman font; double-spaced; and stapled (do not bring me loose pages). Use standard (1 to 1.25-inch) margins.

All written work must include the following:

- 1) Page numbers
- 2) An original title (“midterm paper” is not a title)
- 3) A works cited page

**Presentation:**

You will all give a brief (10-minute) group presentation, in which you make an argument about an assigned text and raise two questions for the class to discuss. The springboard for your presentation should be one genuine question you have about a specific aspect of the text. Your answer to that question will be your argument. On the day you present, you will also submit a 250-word abstract plus an outline of your presentation. See attached guidelines for more details.

**Communication:**

I will respond as promptly as possible to any emails I receive from you between 9am and 6pm on weekdays. Please anticipate that emails you send me after 6pm and on weekends will not be answered right away. Please also know that an hour before our class meets is not a good time to email me questions that you need answered before class.

**Email Etiquette:**

I expect you to use appropriate forms of address and professional language in your emails to me. If I send you information you request, I expect a reply that courteously acknowledges you have received it.

**Disability Accommodation Statement:**

UMass-Amherst is committed to providing an equal educational opportunity for all students. If you have a documented physical, psychological, or learning disability on file with Disability Services (DS), Learning Disabilities Support Services (LDSS), or Psychological Disabilities Services (PDS), you may be eligible for academic accommodations to help you succeed in this course. If you have a documented disability that requires an accommodation, please notify me within the first two weeks of the semester so that we may make appropriate arrangements.

**Academic Honesty Statement:**

Academic dishonesty is prohibited in all programs of the University. Academic dishonesty includes but is not limited to: cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, and facilitating dishonesty. Appropriate sanctions may be imposed on any student who has committed an act of academic dishonesty. Since students are expected to be familiar with this policy and the commonly accepted standards of academic integrity, ignorance of such standards is not sufficient evidence of lack of intent.

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**Syllabus:**

January 19	Course introduction
January 21	Toni Morrison, <i>Sula</i> (1973), 3-66
January 26	<i>Sula</i> , 67-137
January 28	<i>Sula</i> , 138-174; Morrison, Foreword (2004), xi-xvii
February 2	bell hooks, "The Chiltin Circuit" (1990)— <i>online</i> Andrea Lee, <i>Sarah Phillips</i> (1984), 3-59
February 4	<i>Sarah Phillips</i> , 60-117 <b>Presentations on Morrison / hooks / Lee</b>
February 9	Ntozake Shange, <i>for colored girls...</i> (1976), all
February 11	<i>No class</i>
February 16	<i>No class due to Monday schedule</i>
February 18	bell hooks, "Reflections on Race and Sex" (1990)— <i>online</i> <b>Presentations on Shange / hooks</b>
February 23	Lynn Nottage, <i>Fabulation, or The Re-Education of Undine</i> (2004), Act I
February 25	<i>Fabulation</i> , Act II
March 1	Lucille Clifton, <i>Blessing the Boats</i> (2000), 13-82
March 3	<i>Blessing the Boats</i> , 83-127 <b>Presentations on Nottage / Clifton</b>
March 8	Claudia Rankine, <i>Citizen: An American Lyric</i> (2014), 5-66
March 10	<i>Citizen</i> , 69-161 <b>Midterm papers due (5-6 pp.)</b>

*March 12-19: Spring Break*

- March 22                    Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), 3-80
- March 24                    *Zami*, 81-142
- Friday, March 25:        Extra credit opportunity:  
*Feminist Poetics: Legacies of June Jordan* symposium /  
UMass Student Union Ballroom, panels from 10am-5pm
- March 29                    *Zami*, 143-256  
**2-page extra credit response to symposium due**
- March 31                    **Presentations on Rankine / Lorde**
- April 5                      Janet Mock, *Redefining Realness* (2014), xi-99
- April 7                      *Redefining Realness*, 101-162
- April 12                    *Redefining Realness*, 163-258
- April 14                    **Presentation on Mock**  
Mecca Jamilah Sullivan, *blue talk & love* (2015), 1-81
- April 19                    *blue talk & love*, 82-165
- April 21                    *blue talk & love*, 166-224
- April 26                    Course conclusion  
**Final papers due in class (7-8 pp.)**

## **Presentation and Abstract Guidelines Contemporary Black Women Writers, Spring 2016**

### **PRESENTATION OVERVIEW:**

Your presentations are essentially mini-essays that you will deliver orally. They should run approximately 10 minutes. Practice your presentation and time it to ensure you do not run significantly under or over 10 minutes. When you finish your presentation, you will raise two questions for the class. (Your allotted 10 minutes does not include the discussion that will grow out of these questions for the class.)

While I do not want you to create powerpoint presentations for this assignment, you do not need to speak your presentation extemporaneously. You are welcome to present based on notes or to compose your entire presentation and read it aloud. If you script your presentation, just make sure that your sentences are simpler than usual so that the class can take them in aurally.

### **PRESENTATION DETAILS:**

\* The springboard for your presentation should be one genuine question you have about specific moments in or aspects of your chosen text. *The more specific the question, the better.* Good questions include: Why does Lorde call *Zami* a “biomythography”? Why does Clifton write poems for Lucifer? Examples of less good questions include: Why did Nottage write her play? Is *Sula* still relevant today?

\* Develop an answer to your question based on your analysis of about 5 specific moments in the text. Your answer to the question will be your argument.

### **For each presentation, please:**

- 1) Tell us what your question is.
- 2) Tell us what your argument is.
- 3) Present your analysis of about 5 specific moments to explain how you arrived at that argument.
- 4) Raise two questions for class discussion based on your argument. Any question goes, but do not simply ask whether people agree with your argument.

### **ABSTRACT/OUTLINE:**

On the day of your presentation, you will submit a 2-page abstract and outline to me. In the abstract, please summarize the main points you'll cover, in 250 words max. In the outline, give a blueprint of the different steps your presentation will take.

Producing this document will help you clarify your main idea and ensure that your presentation flows logically from one point to the next. It will also help your grade because it will allow me to see what you were going for, in case that is not entirely clear in your oral presentation itself.

### **GROUP PROCEDURES:**

You will want to develop your question and answer together. However, the way you divide the labor among group members is up to you. You might have one person draft the presentation; one person draft the abstract/outline; one person edit both documents.

I want to hear from each group member during the presentation. Again, you can work this out as you see fit. You might have one person deliver the presentation; one person ask the questions; one person answer the post-presentation question(s) I will ask you.

Each member of the group will receive the same grade.

### **GRADING PROCEDURES:**

#### **You will be evaluated based on:**

- 1) Probing/compelling quality of your initial question
- 2) Analysis of specific examples to arrive at your argument
- 3) Clarity of verbal expression and engagement of listeners
- 4) Thoughtfulness of your questions for the class

#### **You will be automatically marked down for:**

- 1) Reaching the 15-minute mark
- 2) Not attending the class at which you are scheduled to present (unless you have an excellent reason that you convey to me at least 24 hours in advance)