Womanist Essayists: Women of Color and the Essay Form

Words are sacred. In many of our traditional cultures, they have been used to both affirm indigenous existence and resist European colonization. Speech and writing can act to effect social change. As people of color, we have multiple relationships to the English language. Historically an invader tongue, many of us have found ways of crafting it to our purpose. By looking critically at the work of radical women of color, we will analyze the ways in which issues of language are embedded in larger social structures, and how marginalized communities have used the written and spoken word to subvert, decenter, and dismantle various linguistic, cultural and racial, political, spiritual, economic, gendered, sexual, and land-based hegemonies. We will study written texts, produce our own, and engage each other in rigorous dialogue. We will examine the essay form and look at how issues of (eco)womanism, indigeneity, queerness, and decolonization; voice, agency, and resistance; environmental racism, sovereignty, capitalism, and critical race theory; land, violence, health, healing, and justice are all related to one another. The course’s pedagogy and structure are informed by Ethnic and Women’s Studies traditions and grassroots organizing in communities of color. Lectures, group discussions, peer review sessions, close readings of the text, in-class writing, and exam enhancement strategies will be strong components of the course. Students will be asked to critique themselves, the literature, their classmates, their own writing, and the world around them. By semester’s end, students will have a clearer sense of their own power and greater confidence in their ability to communicate, both verbally and written, in English, thus preparing them to succeed in all areas of life.

Class Participation

Class meets on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10:50am-12:05pm in New Ingersoll 132. Students are expected to attend all class sessions and be on time. Excessive tardiness will lower your grade. Students who miss more than four class sessions will not pass the course. Students are expected to have done the reading for each session, completed their assignment for the week, and be ready to discuss the literature. Students are actively encouraged to participate in classroom discussions. We will not meet on Tuesday, September 17, 2002 because classes will be following a Monday schedule. We will also not meet on Thursday, November 28, 2002 as it is a campus holiday. The last day of class will be on Thursday, December 12, 2002. The final exam will be held on Monday, December 16, 2002 from 10:30am-12:30pm in a location to be disclosed later.

Office Hours

I am available to meet with students on Tuesdays from 9:15-10:50am in my office, Boylan 2311. Students can also leave messages for me in my mailbox in the English Department, Boylan 2308.
Computers

This section of English 1 is word processing intensive. As such, computers will be integrated into course instruction. Each student will have his or her own computer. Students are required to bring a disk to class, and to save their work from each session. Students will also be allowed to print their work at the end of each class. We will use the computers to enhance our discussions by doing various in-class writing assignments including drills, practice exams, timed/speed writing experiments, and to look at the process of editing and revision.

Weekly Assignments

Students will be expected to complete written assignments for each week of the course. Papers are due at the beginning of class. Essays must be typed, double-spaced, and stapled, with one-inch margins. The student’s name, course name/number, the instructor’s name, the semester/year, the number of the assignment, and the date due should be on the top of the first page. Late papers will be penalized and marked down.

Exit Exam

The final goal of the course, in addition to becoming proficient in expository writing, is the successful completion and passing of the final exam, also known as the exit exam. All students must take this exam. If a student does not pass the exit exam, he or she does not pass the course. The exit exam is two hours long. Students are asked to write one critical, expository essay during this time. In years past, the structure of the exam has been the following: Students are given a prose piece to analyze roughly one to two weeks prior to the exam. They are asked to take it home and study it. Students are then given a second prose piece on the day of the exam and asked to write a compare and contrast essay within two hours. Both prose pieces will be ones the students have not seen before. As this will most likely be the structure of the exam, we will be writing compare and contrast essays throughout the semester.

Grading

Class participation will constitute 25% of a student’s grade, the weekly assignments 50%, and the final exam an additional 25%. Grades for the course will range from A+ to C-, NC (No Credit), and F. Students who successfully complete all requirements for the course, and who pass the exit exam, will receive a grade between A+ to C-. Students who complete all requirements, but who earn below a C- average, and/or who take the exit exam but do not pass it, will receive a grade of NC. These students will be allowed to repeat English 1 the following semester. Students who do not complete all requirements for the course, and/or who fail to take the exit exam, will receive an F. Therefore, it is in your best interest to complete all requirements for the course even if you are not currently receiving a grade of C- or higher.
Required Texts

The following books are available at Shakespeare & Co. Booksellers, located off-campus at 14 Hillel Pl. (between Campus Rd. and Flatbush Ave.). Their phone number is (718) 434-5326.


Suggested Reading

The following texts are suggested for those students interested in reading additional work by womanist authors, and for those who could benefit from studying more fully the essay form.


Authors

Winona LaDuke was born in 1959 in Los Angeles, raised there and in Oregon, and lives on the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota. A mother and enrolled member of the Mississippi Band of Anishinaabeg, she was born to a Native father and an Ashkenazi Jewish mother. She is author of All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life, a novel, Last Standing Woman, and The Winona LaDuke Reader. She founded the Indigenous Women’s Network and the White Earth Recovery Project, and is the Program Director of Honor the Earth. Her writing has also appeared in A Gathering of Spirit: A Collection by North American Indian Women and Reinventing the Enemy’s Language: Contemporary Native Women’s Writing of North America. She has twice been a candidate with the Green Party for Vice-President of the United States.

Mari Matsuda was born in 1956 and grew up in both Los Angeles and Honolulu. The child of Civil Rights activists, she is a sansei Japanese/Okinawan legal scholar, critical race theorist, activist, mother, and Professor of Law at Georgetown University Law Center. She is the author of Where Is Your Body?: And Other Essays on Race, Gender, and the Law, co-author of both Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment and We Won’t Go Back: Making the Case for Affirmative Action, and editor of Called from Within: Early Women Lawyers of Hawai‘i. Her work has also appeared in Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement. She has served on the advisory boards and councils of the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium, the American Civil Liberties Union, and Ms. magazine, as well as being a member of D.C. Asians for Peace and Justice.

Cherríe Moraga was born in 1952 and grew up in the suburbs of Los Angeles. She is a queer Chicana mestiza lesbian playwright, mother, poet, and essayist. She is author of Loving in the War Years: lo que nunca pasó por sus labios, The Last Generation, Waiting in the Wings: Portrait of a Queer Motherhood, Heroes and Saints & Other Plays, The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea/Heart of the Earth: A Popol Vuh Story, and Watsonville: Some Place Not Here/Circle in the Dirt: El Pueblo de East Palo Alto. She is co-editor of This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, Esta puente, mi espalda: Voces de mujeres tercermenristas en los Estados Unidos, Cuentos: Stories by Latinas, and The Sexuality of Latinas. Her work has appeared in Living Chicana Theory, Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About, Contemporary Plays by Women of Color, and Making Face, Making Soul / Haciendo caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color. She is Artist-in-Residence in the Departments of Drama and Spanish and Portuguese at Stanford University.

Barbara Smith was born in 1946 and grew up in Cleveland, where she became involved with the Civil Rights Movement. A Black lesbian theorist and organizer, she co-founded Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, and is the editor of Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology, as well as the co-editor of All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies and The Reader’s Companion to U.S. Women’s History. She is co-author of Yours in the Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism and the author of The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom. Her work has also appeared in A Piece of My Heart: A Lesbian of Colour Anthology and The Black Women’s Health Book: Speaking for Ourselves. Currently, she lives in Albany where she is completing a book on the history and herstory of queer Black people in the U.S.
Schedule

T 9/3  In Class: Introduction / Syllabus Review

R 9/5  Read: BS p. 99 “The Tip of the Iceberg,” BS p. 95 “Racism and Women’s Studies,”
and MM p. 73 “Where Is Your Body? Protest and Social Transformation”

T 9/10 Read: BS p. 111 “Homophobia: Why Bring It Up?” and BS p.75 “We Must Always
Bury Our Dead Twice: A Tribute to James Baldwin”

R 9/12 Read: MM p. 3 “When the First Quail Calls: Multiple Consciousness as
and BS p. 124 “Blacks and Gays: Healing the Great Divide”
Essay 1: Compare and contrast the main ideas of Mari Matsuda and Barbara Smith.

T 9/17  No Class (Monday Schedule)

R 9/19 Essay 1: 1st Draft Due for Peer Review Session
Read: WL p. 1 Introduction and WL p. 11 “Akwesasne: Mohawk Mothers’ Milk and
PCBs”
Note: Today is the last day to drop a class.

T 9/24 Essay 1: 2nd Draft Due for Instructor
Read: WL: p. 27 “Seminoles: At the Heart of the Everglades”

R 9/26 Read: WL p. 49 “Nitassinan: The Hunter and the Peasant” and WL p. 75 “Northern
Cheyenne: A Fire in the Coal Fields”

T 10/1 Essay 1: 2nd Draft Returned

R 10/3 Essay 1: 3rd/Final Draft Due for Instructor
Read: WL p. 187 “NativeSUN: Determining a Future”
Essay 2: Compare and contrast the environmental, political, economic, and health
situations of two different Native Nations as described by Winona LaDuke.

T 10/8 Essay 1: 3rd/Final Draft Returned
Essay 2: 1st Draft Due for Peer Review Session
Read: CM p. vii Introducción a la Primera Edición and CM pp. 2-80 [in particular
CM p. 2 “It Is You, My Sister, Who Must Be Protected,” CM p. 30 “Pesadilla,” and
CM p. 42 “La Guerra”]

R 10/10 Essay 2: 2nd Draft Due for Instructor
Read: CM pp. 82-138 [in particular CM p. 82 “A Long Line of Vendidas”]
T 10/15 Essay 2: 2nd Draft Returned

R 10/17 Essay 2: 3rd/Final Draft Due for Instructor
Essay 3: How do racism, sexism, classism, and queerness intersect in the lives of Chicanas (and women of color in general) as evidenced in the writings of Cherríe Moraga? What avenues of resistance does Moraga suggest in relation to these systems of oppression, what strategies? In what ways can her own life be seen as an example?

T 10/22 Essay 2: 3rd/Final Draft Returned
Essay 3: 1st Draft Due for Peer Review Session

R 10/24 Essay 3: 2nd Draft Due for Instructor

T 10/29 Essay 3: 2nd Draft Returned
Read: BS 44 “The Truth That Never Hurts: Black Lesbians in Fiction in the 1980s”

R 10/31 Essay 3: 3rd/Final Draft Due for Instructor
Essay 4: What is the difference between freedom of speech (or academic freedom / artistic expression) and hate speech / hate crimes? Why is this distinction important? What are the social forces that lead to censorship and repression? How can we change the way we think about speech, art, writing, and the academy?

T 11/5 Essay 3: 3rd/Final Draft Returned
Essay 4: 1st Draft Due for Peer Review Session

R 11/7 Essay 4: 2nd/Final Draft Due for Instructor
Essay 5: What are Cherríe Moraga’s and Winona LaDuke’s strategies for rebuilding
their Nations, and for rebuilding Native Nations in general? What must occur for a people to once again be sovereign on their land and in their lives?

T 11/12 Essay 4: 2nd/Final Draft Returned
Essay 5: 1st Draft Due for Peer Review Session
Read: MM p. 29 “Feminism and Property” and WL p. 139 “Buffalo Nations, Buffalo Peoples”
Note: Tomorrow is the last day to withdraw from a class.

R 11/14 Essay 5: 2nd/Final Draft Due for Instructor

T 11/19 Essay 5: 2nd/Final Draft Returned


R 11/28 No Class (Campus Holiday)

T 12/3 In Class; Discuss Final Readings for the Semester, Practice Exam Essay 1, and Strategies for the Practice Exam

R 12/5 In Class; Read Practice Exam Essay 2 and Complete Practice Exam

T 12/10 In Class; Small Group Strategizing for the Exit Exam

R 12/12 Last Day of Class
In Class; Course Review, Feedback, and Final Questions in Regards to the Exit Exam

M 12/16 Exit Exam