Womanist Essayists: Women of Color and the Essay Form

By looking critically at the work of four individual women writers of color, we will analyze the essay form and the way different authors construct meaning and use language. By utilizing womanist theory and methods found in both decolonial and ethnic studies, we will look at issues of voice, agency, and resistance as evidenced in the prose form. We will closely examine the creative process and immerse ourselves in the production, revision, and editing of text. By using race, class, gender, and sexuality as lenses by which to critique writing and the world, we will raise questions about orality, concision/expansion, literacy, and (cultural) coherency. We will look at how authors structure their arguments and state their beliefs, and how they both use and resist the English language. By studying their work, we hope to get a more informed sense of our own. This course is designed to raise questions about pedagogy, power, (the writing) process, and (life-long) learning. Students will gain concrete skills that will aid them in their writing and reading life, as well as in analyzing the world around them. Peer review and rigorous discussion will be strong elements of the course, as will craft and precision. Students completing the course will have a clearer sense of the power of their own speech, and greater confidence in their ability to communicate—both verbally and written—in English. In addition, students will find themselves more self-reflexive and better equipped to succeed in an academic environment. This course is good preparation for future classes in English, the social sciences and humanities, and anyone interested in increasing their capacity to participate fully in the life of the mind.

Class Participation

Class meets on Mondays and Wednesdays from 2-3:15pm in New Ingersoll 132. Students are expected to attend all class sessions and to be on time. Students who miss more than four class sessions will not pass the course. Excessive tardiness will also result in a lowering of your grade. 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 have class on Monday, February 18, 2002 as that is a campus-wide holiday. We will also not meet on Monday, March 25, 2002 and Wednesday, March 27, 2002 as both days are during Spring Break. The last regular class session will be on Wednesday, May 15, 2002. The final exam for our section will be held on Monday, May 20, 2002 from 10:30am-12:30pm in our regular classroom or in a location to be disclosed later.

Office Hours

I am available to meet with students after class on Wednesdays from 3:15-4:15pm in my office, which is located in Boylan 2311. Students can also leave messages for me, if need be, in my mailbox, which is located in the English Department, Boylan 2308.
Computers

As this section of English 1 is word processing intensive, computers will be integrated into course instruction. Each student will be assigned a 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 (but not limited to) 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 a weekly written assignment for each week of the course. Assignments will be due on Mondays at the beginning of class. All papers are to be typed, double-spaced, and stapled. Papers should have one-inch margins, and appropriate identifying information (student’s name, course name, the date, instructor’s name) should be found on 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 are required to take this exam. If a student does not pass the 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 week 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 duration of the semester.

Grading

Class participation will constitute 25% of a student’s grade, the weekly assignments 50%, and the final exam an additional 25%. In line with the procedures of Brooklyn College, letter grades for the course will range from A+ to C-, with the additional possibilities of NC (No Credit) or an 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 are earning 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, thereby failing the course. 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 the Brooklyn College Bookstore.


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

Gamba Adisa/Audre Lorde was born in 1934. A Black lesbian mother, writer, librarian, professor, and activist, she was raised in Harlem by parents from Barbados and Grenada. She taught at Tougaloo College, a historically Black college in Mississippi, and later became Professor of English at Hunter College. Adisa/Lorde co-founded Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press and was the author of numerous poetry collections, including Undersong, The Black Unicorn, Our Dead Behind Us, and The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance. She wrote a biomythography, Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, as well as numerous prose collections including The Cancer Journals, Sister Outsider, and A Burst of Light. Her work also appeared in Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology and A Piece of My Heart: A Lesbian of Colour Anthology. Returning to the Caribbean for the final years of her journey, she lived with her partner in St. Croix and made her transition in 1992. In a ceremony shortly before her death, she took the name Gamba Adisa, which means “warrior” and “she who makes her meaning known.”

Beth Brant (Degonwadonti) was born in 1941 in Detroit. A Two-Spirited Bay of Quinte Mohawk from Tyendinaga Reserve in Ontario, Canada, a lesbian mother and grandmother, a writer and editor, survivor, and activist of Iroquois and Irish-Scottish heritage, Brant was raised in Michigan. She is editor of the groundbreaking anthology, A Gathering of Spirit: A Collection by North American Indian Women, and the author of three poetry/prose collections, Mohawk Trail, Food & Spirits, and Writing as Witness. In addition, she returned to her traditional homeland to complete I’ll Sing 'til the Day I Die: Conversations with Tyendinaga Elders. Her work has also appeared in Making Face, Making Soul / Haciendo caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color and Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology. A former high school dropout, she began writing at age 40.

Aurora Levins Morales was born in 1954. A bisexual Puerto Rican/Ashkenazi Jewish writer, activist, professor, mother, survivor, and person with disabilities, she was raised on the island of Puerto Rico; both of her parents are from New York City. Co-author with her mom, Rosario Morales, of the poetry/prose collection, Getting Home Alive, she is also the author of the essay collection, Medicine Stories: History, Culture and the Politics of Integrity, as well as Remedios: Stories of Earth and Iron from the History of Puertoqueñas, a prose poetry retelling of the herstory of Puerto Rican women, beginning 200,000 years ago in Africa and leading up to the birth of her daughter. Her work has also appeared in This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color. Levins Morales has taught at numerous universities including San Francisco State University, the University of Minnesota, and University of California, Berkeley.

Haunani-Kay Trask was raised on the island of O‘ahu, Hawai‘i, with genealogical ties to both Māui and Kaua‘i. A Kanaka Maoli activist, professor, and writer, she is the author of a collection of essays and speeches, From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai‘i, the poetry collection, Light in the Crevice Never Seen, and the earlier Eros and Power: The Promise of Feminist Theory. She co-produced the award-winning documentary, Act of War: The Overthrow of the Hawaiian Nation. Her work has also appeared in The Colour of Resistance: A Contemporary Collection of Writing by Aboriginal Women. Professor of Hawaiian Studies and former Director of The Center for Hawaiian Studies at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, Trask is a member of Ka Lāhui Hawai‘i, the largest sovereignty movement in Hawai‘i.
Schedule

W 1/30  In Class: Introduction / Syllabus Review  
Essay 1: What are the main points of Aurora Levens Morales’ theories / arguments?

M 2/4  Essay 1: Due  
Read: ALM p. 51 “The Politics of Childhood”

Essay 2: What are the main areas of your life in which you have been silenced? What would it mean to break those silences?

M 2/11  Essay 2: Due  

W 2/13  Read: BB(D) p. 5 “The Good Red Road: Journeys of Homecoming in Native Women’s Writing,” BB(D) p. 35 “Keep the Drum Playing,” and BB(D) p. 49 “From the Inside—Looking at You”  
Essay 3: According to Beth Brant (Degonwadonti), what is distinctive about Native (women’s) writing? How is this evidenced in her own work?

M 2/18  No Class (Campus Holiday)

W 2/20  Essay 3: Due  
Read: BB(D) p. 25 “Anodynes and Amulets,” BB(D) p. 67 “Writing as Witness,” and BB(D) p. 75 “To Be or Not To Be Has Never Been the Question”  
Essay 4: What new revelations have occurred to you since the last set of readings? What have you learned?

M 2/25  Essay 4: Due  

W 2/27  Read: H-KT p. 151 “Racism against Hawaiians at the University of Hawai‘i: A Personal and Political View” and H-KT p. 169 “The Politics of Academic Freedom as the Politics of White Racism”

M 3/4  Read: H-KT p. 185 “Native Student Organizing: The Case of the University of Hawai‘i”
W 3/6  Read: H-KT p. 41 “Politics in the Pacific Islands: Imperialism and Native Self-Determination”
Essay 5: In what specific ways do Native Hawai`ians experience racism?

M 3/11  Essay 5: Due
Read: ALM p. 23 “The Historian as Curandera,” BB(D) p. 83 “Grandmothers of a New World,” and GA/AL p. 134 “Learning from the 60s”

W 3/13  Essay 6: In what ways is Beth Brant (Dagonwadonti)’s essay on Nanye`hi and Pocahontas an example of medicinal history as described by Aurora Levins Morales?

M 3/18  Essay 6: Due
Read: ALM p. 83 “Puerto Ricans and Jews”

Essay 7: Why is reclaiming the erotic important? How is the erotic related to issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality?

M 3/25  No Class (Spring Break)

W 3/27  No Class (Spring Break)

M 4/1  Essay 7: Due

W 4/3  Read: H-KT p. 87 “Women’s Mana and Hawaiian Sovereignty”
Essay 8: How have gender and sexuality been affected by colonialism?

M 4/8  Essay 8: Due

W 4/10  Read: GA/AL p. 45 “Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving” and GA/AL p. 60 “Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface”
Essay 9: Why are the ending of sexism and queerphobia essential to the healing of the Black race?

M 4/15  Essay 9: Due
Read: ALM p. 75 “Raícism: Rootedness as Spiritual and Political Practice,” ALM p. 79 “What Race Isn’t: Teaching Racism,” and ALM p. 93 “Class, Privilege and Loss”
**W 4/17**  
Read: GA/AL p. 145 “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger”  
**Essay 10:** Why is internal/self-critique, on both a communal and individual level, important?  
**Note:** Today is the last day to withdraw from a class.

**M 4/22**  
**Essay 10:** Due  
Read: GA/AL p. 176 “Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report”

**W 4/24**  
**Essay 11:** Is nationalism good for the land and for Indigenous peoples? For people (of color) in general? Can nationalists disagree? Does nationalism silence people? Is it oppressive or liberatory?

**M 4/29**  
**Essay 11:** Due  
Read: H-KT p. 101 “Neocolonialism and Indigenous Structures”

**W 5/1**  
**Essay 12:** Why is writing important? Can it be a form of resistance? How do you define “activism”?

**M 5/6**  
**Essay 12:** Due  
**In Class:** Discuss Final Readings for the Semester, Practice Exam Essay 1, and Strategies for the Practice Exam

**W 5/8**  
**In Class:** Read Practice Exam Essay 2 and Complete Practice Exam

**M 5/13**  
**In Class:** Small Group Strategizing for the Exit Exam

**W 5/15**  
**In Class:** Last Day of Class  
**In Class:** Course Review, Feedback, and Final Questions in Regards to the Exit Exam

**M 5/20**  
Exit Exam