

English 3325: Studies in Literary Topics
**“Womanism,” Black Feminism, and
African American Women’s Writing, 1969-1985**
Texas Tech University
Spring 2022

Section 01: MW 1:00pm-2:20pm

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Writing in 1987 about the notable absence of African American women writers in too many critics’ formulation of the Black literary canon, Mary Helen Washington asked, “How does the heroic voice and heroic image of the black woman get suppressed in a culture that depended on her heroism for survival?” Indeed, as Washington argued, Black women had been central to any historical nexus between African American writing and civil rights politics. In addition, as Washington and her Black feminist critical contemporaries also noted, African American women writers had been central to an assertive reconsideration of gender, womanhood, and sexuality during the rise of second wave feminism in the late twentieth century. With these two important contexts in mind, this course looks at a plentiful and noteworthy historical period in African American women’s writing, to consider the important intellectual, aesthetic, and ideological interventions this body of writing inaugurated. We will study writing in several genres, and alongside contemporaneous critical and theoretical texts, to consider in detail the late-twentieth-century legacy of now-canonical figures like Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Audre Lorde, among others.

Course Goals, Expected Outcomes, and Methods of Assessments:

The objective of the humanities in a core curriculum is to expand the students’ knowledge of the human condition and human cultures, especially in relation to behaviors, ideas, and values expressed in works of human imagination and thought. Through study in disciplines such as literature and philosophy, students will engage in critical analysis and develop an appreciation of the humanities as fundamental to the health and survival of any society.

With that in mind, our course goals are:

Broadly, to study the generation of Black women writers who began publishing amid the seismic cultural shifts of the Civil Rights Era and the Sexual Revolution. Reading across genres, we will consider the major creative, political, and intellectual interventions these artists made amid the Black freedom movement’s challenge to white supremacy and second-wave feminism’s reconsideration of gender and sexuality in the United States.

Students who satisfactorily complete this course should be able **to demonstrate** a thorough understanding of major figures and texts in African American women’s writing of the late

twentieth century. More specifically, students should be able **to integrate** course readings with course lectures and discussions **to understand** this literature *in context*—**to articulate** how texts relate to other texts, how works narrate and complicate the history of the period, and how, in total, course readings both define and, at times, challenge ideas about race, gender, and sexuality in American life.

The methods of assessment for this course are various. The most weight will be given to critical writing, in both formal and informal modes. Students should be able **to articulate** their understanding of African American women’s writing in straightforward prose that bears evidence of critical thinking about course issues and topics, and, in the case of the formal research paper, is organized around a **clear, distinct thesis statement and direct topic sentences**. Students should know the difference between “observation” and “interpretation,” between “reportorial” writing and “analytical” writing. While students should be able **to identify** notable stylistic characteristics in each text, they should also be able **to explain** how those stylistic qualities are meaningful: how they suggest connections to other texts, how they relate to historical and political context, and how they operate symbolically.

Students will also be assessed on informal oral presentations in class and ongoing contributions to course discussions. In classroom discussions, students should exhibit a willingness **to discuss** topics that arise out of our readings and lectures. Students are not expected to show mastery of each work, or offer fully-formed interpretations of works, but simply **to work through** ideas about readings and topics in conversation.

There are **two informal presentations** each student must sign up for in this class. In one, students are asked to find **a historical book review of one of the major texts** on our reading list and summarize the reviewer’s evaluation of the text for the entire class. These presentations are intended to help us think about how these texts were being understood at the time of their initial publication. In the other informal presentation, students are asked to find a **peer-reviewed academic essay (published in either a scholarly journal or an edited scholarly collection)** on one of the major texts, and which they think offers particularly productive insight into that text. Students will summarize the argument of that article in class. Students must choose a different text for each of these assignments and everybody must sign up for both presentations by **26 January**.

Required Texts:

Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969)

Toni Cade Bambara, ed., *The Black Woman* (1970)

Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973)

Gayl Jones, *Corregidora* (1975)

Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1975)

Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1978)

Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, & Class* (1981)

Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (1982)

Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984)

Plus selected shorter readings archived under the Course Readings folder on Blackboard.

Course Work and Distribution of Term Marks:

Final research paper (3000 words double-spaced)	30%	due 20 April
Submission of complete reading journal	10%	due 2 May
First student-selected journal entry (2-3 pages)	10%	due 14 Feb
Second student-selected journal entry (2-3 pages)	10%	due 21 March
Historical book review summary assignment	10%	sign up
Scholarly article summary assignment	10%	sign up
Informed participation in class discussion	20%	

You are required to write the following for this course: **an ongoing reading journal** on course materials that should amount to **20-30 pages of typed material** by semester's end, and **one critical research paper** approximately 3000 words in length. In addition, you can expect to do some informal, reflective writing exercises in class for which individual grades will not be assigned. These informal writing exercises will hopefully stimulate your contributions to class discussions, though, and so might be considered as figuring into your participation grade.

On Reading Journals:

Each of you is required to keep an ongoing reading journal in which you record, for each course text, your own observations, interpretive points, questions, connections between texts, and follow-up points to class discussions. This journal is intended to keep you writing throughout the course, but without the burden of having always to produce polished prose. Use the journal to work through your ideas about the various readings in the course and to provide you with material to bring to class discussions. The writing in your journal may be informal, but you are required **to submit two excerpts** (which I will grade, but which you choose) at different points in the semester. These excerpts should be selections that you think offer a breakthrough in your thinking about a text or texts (or about course themes and contexts in general), interpretive moments that you think reflect your best critical thinking, or writing in which you build productively on points that we have raised in class. Toward the end of the semester you will be required to submit the entire reading journal, just so I can see that you have been keeping up with your writing throughout the duration of the course. Know that I expect to see, on average, 1-2 pages of material for each of the short works we read at the beginning of the semester, and at least 2-3 pages of material for each full-length book. **Please see the final page of this syllabus for some prompting questions to help you approach each journal entry.**

The **research paper** allows you to engage in critical debates on a topic through sustained analysis of one or more literary texts from the reading list. Your paper should focus on one of the "big" ideas that stretch across discussions in our class. Again, though, think of the research paper as an argumentative exercise, organized around a clear thesis statement, and intended to persuade a reader to adopt your position on a critical issue in the study of African American women's writing. For the research paper, I expect to see a **thoughtful and considered engagement with at least three secondary sources** rather than a superficial citing of materials from your bibliography. I want you to decide on your own topic for the research paper, but I also suggest that you do so in conversation with me to ensure that the scope and subject matter of your paper are both manageable and appropriate for the course. Because this is a substantial assignment, I encourage you to begin thinking

about topics early and to schedule a meeting with me to discuss your topic well in advance of the deadline.

Informed participation assumes that you will not only read all assigned texts in time for their discussion in class, but also consider that material carefully and be prepared to contribute to our collective contemplation of them. I suggest that you take notes as you read each text, and be careful to record your observations as you move through material. Pay attention to connections between texts. Take note of how works correspond to contextual issues that I introduce in class. Make a list of questions that arise when you read the material. All of these approaches will be beneficial to our discussions as a group.

Course Policies:

Grades and Written Assignments:

1. Grades will be assigned as percentage scores (0-100) throughout the term. Ultimately, your final grade will be converted to the university's letter grade system using this scale:

A+= 97-100	A=94-96	A-=90-93
B+=87-89	B=84-86	B-=80-83
C+=77-79	C=74-76	C-=70-73
D+=67-69	D=63-66	F=62 or below

Please note that I reserve A-range marks for work of superior quality. Grades in the A-range are by no means the default grade for completing all the assignments in this course.

2. You must complete the writing assignments (that is, the entire reading journal and the final paper) to pass this course.
3. Papers are to be submitted on Blackboard by 11:59pm on the day they are due.
4. Late papers will be penalized with a **10%** deduction for each day they are handed in after the due date, including weekend days. Even after deductions have guaranteed that a paper will receive a failing grade, you **must** still submit that paper to pass the course.
5. If extenuating circumstances will prevent you from handing a paper in on time, talk to me **before** the paper is due. I am not likely to make allowances after the deadline has come and gone.
6. All papers are to be typed (in a font no bigger than 12-point) and double-spaced. Please adhere to MLA guidelines for formatting and bibliographical citations.
7. I do **not** accept email submissions of written assignments.
8. I do **not** answer questions about paper topics over email. If you have a question about a paper in development or a topic you wish to propose, I insist—to make it easier on both of us—that you come and talk to me in person at my office hours or at a mutually convenient appointment time.
9. I will respond to emails within conventional business hours (i.e. between 9am and 5pm on Monday to Friday). If you write to me outside of those hours, expect a reply by the next business day.

Plagiarism and Cheating:

I expect you to adhere to the highest standard of honesty and academic integrity. All work that you complete in this course **must** be your own.

Your final paper must be organized around your own ideas and arguments. (In the interest of aiding the resolution of any potential disputes about plagiarism, I encourage you to retain all drafts of your work until the completion of the course.) When you introduce any ideas or quotations that are not your own in your essay, you must **cite explicitly** the source of that material according to MLA citation practice. To repeat, **any** material that is not your own—including verbatim quotations from outside work or paraphrases of other writers' ideas or arguments—must be referenced explicitly. If you have any questions about whether or not you have used a source properly on a given assignment, I encourage you to discuss the issue with me **before** you hand that assignment in. Because academic dishonesty constitutes a grave breach of trust between instructor and student, and diminishes the value of honest students' work, I take all plagiarism cases very seriously. **Plagiarizing materials in any of the three course papers will warrant an immediate failing grade for the entire course.**

Absences:

I will allow each student **four** absences without penalty. Each class that you miss after four absences will warrant a reduction of your **overall** course grade by 10%. I do not designate between excused or unexcused absences, except for those designated as excused according to university policy. **That is, if you miss a class because of illness or a car accident or a job interview or a hangover or anything else, you have used up one of your four absences. (Do not bring me documentation, as I will not remove the absence from your record.)** Because you only have four classes you can afford to miss without penalty, I encourage you to manage your attendance wisely, reserving those four absences for emergencies when you need them. For an explanation of university-approved absences, consult your student handbook. **Also, I expect you to know how many classes you have missed throughout the term. You may confer with me at various points in the term about how many absences I have recorded, but please also manage your own attendance record. For exceptions to this policy related to COVID-19, see below.**

Classroom Civility and Access:

I expect each of you to assist in creating and maintaining a classroom environment that is conducive to learning. At the bottom level, this assumes that you will always be respectful to me and to your fellow classmates. Our classroom space will be open to differences of opinion and ideology, and accessible to all students without regard to gender, race, ethnicity, creed, sexual orientation, or physical limitation. I will **not tolerate** the use of any derogatory or demeaning language. Always extend the same courtesy to other members of the class that you wish to see extended to you. Listen quietly when others are speaking; raise your hand to ask questions or introduce new points; do not have side conversations apart from our main discussion. I encourage dissent in discussion, but insist that you articulate your ideas in a respectful manner. You are welcome to bring food and drink to class provided that your consumption of them is not a distraction. (Watch those crunchy foods and noisy wrappers.) If you are a cellular phone user, always **make sure** that your phone is turned off before class begins.

Any student who because of a disability may require special arrangements in order to meet course requirements should contact me as soon as possible to make necessary

accommodations. Students should provide appropriate verification from Student Disability Services.

COVID-19 Information:

Vaccinations: Texas Tech University strongly recommends students adhere to CDC guidelines on COVID-19, including obtaining COVID-19 vaccinations. If you were unable to obtain a vaccination prior to your arrival on campus, the COVID-19 vaccine is available at Student Health Services by appointment. You can find additional information about the vaccine at <https://www.ttu.edu/commitment/covid-19-vaccine/index.php>.

Face Covering Policy: As of May 19, 2021, face coverings are optional in TTU facilities and classrooms but, based on CDC guidelines, are recommended and welcome, especially for those who have not been vaccinated for COVID-19 or who may have susceptibilities to the virus.

COVID-19 Absence Policy Exceptions:

I will offer exceptions to the attendance policy for students who need to quarantine either due to direct exposure to COVID-19 infection or who test positive for the virus. Students should consult <https://ttucovid19.ttu.edu/User/Consent> for all university protocols related to exposure and positive tests.

Tentative Schedule of Readings and Lectures:

WEEK ONE:

12 January: Introduction to course.

WEEK TWO:

17 January: **No class scheduled (MLK Day).**

19 January: Lecture/Discussion: “The Civil Rights Movement and the Sexual Revolution.”

WEEK THREE:

24 January: Alice Walker, “The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?” (1966-67), “Coming Apart” (1979)

26 January: Barbara Christian, “Images of Black Women in Afro-American Literature: From Stereotype to Character” (1975), “Creating a Universal Literature: Afro-American Women Writers” (1983), Sherley Anne Williams, “Some Implications of Womanist Theory” (1986)

WEEK FOUR:

31 January: Combahee River Collective, “The Combahee River Statement” (1977), Keeanga Yamahtta-Taylor Interview with Alicia Garza (2017), bell hooks, “Black Women and Feminism” (1982)

2 February: Deborah McDowell, “New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism” (1980), Mary Helen Washington, “‘The Darkened Eye Restored’: Notes Toward a Literary History of Black Women” (1987); Mae G. Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and

the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition" (1989)

WEEK FIVE:

7 February: Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969)

9 February: Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969)

WEEK SIX:

14 February: **First Student Journal Excerpt Due on Blackboard;** Toni Cade Bambara, ed., *The Black Woman* (1970) [pages 1-164, or through Katz, "End Racism in Education"]

16 February: Toni Cade Bambara, ed., *The Black Woman* (1970) [pages 1-164, or through Katz, "End Racism in Education"]

WEEK SEVEN:

21 February: Toni Cade Bambara, ed., *The Black Woman* (1970) [pages 165-end, or from Katz to end of book]

23 February: Toni Cade Bambara, ed., *The Black Woman* (1970) [pages 165-end, or from Katz to end of book]

WEEK EIGHT:

28 February: Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973)

2 March: Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973)

WEEK NINE:

7 March: Gayl Jones, *Corregidora* (1975)

9 March: Gayl Jones, *Corregidora* (1975)

WEEK TEN:

14 March: **No class scheduled (Spring Break).**

16 March: **No class scheduled (Spring Break).**

WEEK ELEVEN:

21 March: **Second Student Journal Excerpt Due on Blackboard;** Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1975)

23 March: Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1975)

WEEK TWELVE:

28 March: Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1978)

30 March: Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1978)

WEEK THIRTEEN:

4 April: Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, & Class* (1981)

6 April: Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, & Class* (1981)

WEEK FOURTEEN

11 April: Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" (1974), "Looking for Zora" (1975), "Writing *The Color Purple*" (1982)

13 April: Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (1982)

WEEK FIFTEEN:

18 April: **No class scheduled.**

20 April: **Research Paper Due on Blackboard;** Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (1982)

WEEK SIXTEEN:

25 April: Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

27 April: Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

WEEK SEVENTEEN:

2 May: **Complete Reading Journal Due;** Conclusions

Note: You are responsible for finding out about any changes that I make to this schedule of readings while you are away from class.

Reading Journal Prompt Questions:

Use the following questions to generate your journal responses if you feel stuck about what to write.

1. If this is a non-fiction text, what is the main argument of this reading? What does it critique or argue against?
2. If this is a work of fiction, poetry, or drama, what contexts does it represent or dramatize for readers? What problems does it illustrate through creative means?
3. What historical figures or contexts were you introduced to in this reading that you didn't know already and had to look up? Explain any references you looked up.
4. What connections might you draw to other readings in this course or other texts you've studied?
5. Identify a passage from this text you found beautiful.
6. How do you see the relevance of this text in our current time?