

Prof. Habiba Ibrahim
English 555
Winter 2017

Monday/Wednesday, 1:30-3:20pm
Parrington Hall, room 206
Office Hours: Friday, 9:00-11:00am & by appointment
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Black Feminism and the Art of Being Human

Course Description:

This course will focus on black female subjectivity in relation to social formations of the human, which has been conceptualized as the central subject of Western modernity, the product of discourse, the precondition for political personhood. We will engage black feminism as an intellectual project that has developed around the question of “being human”: for subjects who have been socially constituted as enslaved commodities, as objects of Western man’s knowledge—as beings and bodies dispossessed of humanity—what has being human come to mean? How have black feminist analytics contributed to the development of alternative versions of the human? Which concepts, methods, and philosophies have influenced the way black feminist thinkers engage the question of historical time, or the manner in which the past (of early Western modernity and New World slavery, or Jim Crow segregation) becomes knowable?

We will begin to trace the developments of black feminist thought from the poststructuralist era of the 1980s. “Poststructuralism” names a set of related, but not unified, theories that prompt questions about how human beings are related to language, its symbolic equivalents, and thus, to the social world. With this “linguist turn” comes an intensified interest in the “subject” in cultural criticism and theory. As a grammatical marker, the “subject” indicates an agent of action; this can be extended into the manner in which we think of the subject of liberal political theory as being autonomous and self-possessive. However, the “subject” also bears a relation to “subjection,” which indicates the opposite condition of autonomous agency. Much poststructuralist thought is interested in this complication between autonomy and dominance, a complication with which the subject is endowed. Black feminist intellectuals have contributed to theories about the social, cultural, and historical production of subjectivity; perhaps most pertinently, they have asked and theorized about how the subject of Western humanism, and all those excluded from that subjectivity, have been constituted. Thus, black feminism can be thought of as an intellectual project that investigates not only how the “subject,” whose consciousness is the outcome of social productions of meaning, is related to an exterior social world. It also asks how focusing on the black female subject reveals broader processes of embodiment.

This course, then, strives to revisit the insights of 1970s-era black feminist thought—which is perhaps best known for making salient the notion of “identity politics”—though the expansion of a black feminist intellectual project into the era of the “decentered” subject and beyond. The attempt

is to provide a course that not only looks back to revisit prior, foundational, black feminist analytics. Additionally, the goal is to consider how black feminist thought bears a critique of the version of human that emerges from Western modernity, and looks toward the present and future of the literary and cultural criticism, which is turning away from “social constructivism” toward affects, objects, and biological material. This course ends with an engagement of performance studies—as it has been taken up in black cultural studies—as a rubric that makes the historical racialization of bodies an integral part of inquiries into how bodies are possessed with/dispossessed of subjectivity, how bodies “perform” the status of the object, how the object becomes an agent, or is affected by lines of subjection, and/or pleasure.

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Required and Optional Texts:

*****Available on Canvas*****

Required:

Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987)

Mae Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues: Dialectics, Dialogics, and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition” (1989)

Sylvia Wynter, “Beyond Miranda’s Meanings: Un/silencing the ‘Demonic Ground’ of Caliban’s ‘Woman’” (1990)

Evelynn Hammond, “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality” (1994)

José Muñoz, ed. Special Issue of *GLQ*, “Theorizing Queer Inhumanisms: The Sense of Brownness” (2015)

Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” (1997)

Supplemental:

“Whatcha Gonna Do? Revisiting ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book’: A Conversation with Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Shelly Eversley, & Jennifer L. Morgan” (2007)

Judith Butler, excerpt from *Gender Trouble* (1990)

Sylvia Wynter, “On Disenchanting Discourse: ‘Minority’ Literary Criticism and Beyond” (1987)

Michel Foucault, excerpt from *The Order of Things* (1966)

David Scott, "The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter (2000)

Saidiya Hartman and Frank Wilderson, III, "The Position of the Unthought" (2003)

*****Available at the University Book Store*****

Required:

Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (1997)

Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus* (2014)

Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake* (2016)

Kimberly Juanita Brown, *The Repeating Body* (2016)

Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars* (2015)

Recommended:

Kathrine McKittrick, *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (2015)

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Learning Accommodations: If you would like to ask for learning accommodations as a result of a disability, please contact Disability Resources for Students: 448 Schmitz, (206) 543-8924. If you have a letter from Disability Resources for Students indicating that you have a disability and need accommodations, please see me, so that we can discuss appropriate methods of assistance.

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Course Requirements:

This graduate seminar asks each student to be prepared for each class session by having done the required readings, and contributing to discussion on a regular basis. Each student is expected to select a reading about which he/she/they will give a 10-minute presentation. The presentation itself will be evaluated according to the terms of a rubric (included at the end of this syllabus). Please note: for further commentary about the content of the presentation, please arrange to meet with me during office hours, which are on Friday mornings and by appointment. Please submit a typewritten version of your presentation onto Canvas. The bulk of a student's grade will be based on the final quarter paper, which should be a roughly 10- to 15-page essay on a topic that bears a relation (even

if somewhat tangential) to the course content. Further requirements for the final paper will be posted on Canvas.

Course participation (20%)
Class Presentation (20%)
Final Essay (60%)

Breaches of academic integrity (i.e., plagiarism) will result in severe disciplinary action. Please see what constitutes academic misconduct in the Student Conduct Code for the University of Washington (particularly item 3c): <http://www.washington.edu/admin/rules/policies/WAC/478-120-024.html>. Please keep all cell phone ring tones off while in class. Please refrain from personal (not class-related) computer or phone use while in class. Finally, please note that the classroom is an intellectually inclusive space. Course content and discussion may not always be comfortable, but classroom etiquette requires all of us to listen and respond to each other with thoughtfulness and respect.

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Course Schedule (subject to change):

Please note: readings with an asterisk (*) can be found under “Files” on Canvas. Under “Files” is another folder, called “Supplemental Readings.” Like a nesting doll, the “Supplemental Readings” folder contains another, optional folder, called, “A Brief Genealogy of Black Feminist Thought.”

Week One: Introduction

Wed. 1/4: Introduction to the course

Week Two: The Problem of the Subject

Mon. 1/9: *Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”

[Supplementary texts: “Whatcha Gonna Do? Revisiting ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe’” and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, excerpt]

Wed. 1/11: *Mae Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues,” excerpted from *Speaking in Tongues and Dancing Diaspora*

[Supplementary text: *Sylvia Wynter, “On Disenchanted Discourse: ‘Minority’ Literary Criticism and Beyond”]

Week Three: Genres of the Human

Mon. 1/16: Martin Luther King, Jr. Day: No Class

Wed. 1/18: *Sylvia Wynter, “Beyond Miranda’s Meanings: Un/silencing the ‘Demonic Ground’ of Caliban’s ‘Woman’”

[Supplementary text: *Michel Foucault, excerpt from *The Order of Things* and *David Scott, “The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter”]

Week Four: (In)Human Sexualities

Mon. 1/23: *Evelynn Hammond, “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality”
*Special Issue of *GLQ*, “Theorizing Queer Inhumanisms”

Wed. 1/25: *Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?”

Week Five: The Problem of Liberal Humanism, Part I

Mon. 1/30: Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, Part I: “Introduction,” chapters 2 and 3, “Redressing the Pained Body” and “Seduction and the Ruses of Power”

Wed. 2/1: Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, Part II: chapters 4 and 6, “The Burdened Individuality of Freedom” and “Instinct and Injury”

Week Six: The Problem of Liberal Humanism, Part II

Mon. 2/6: Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*: “Introduction,” chapters 1-4, “Blackness,” “Bare Life,” “Assemblages,” and “Racism”

Wed. 2/8: Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*: chapters 5 and 6, “Law,” and “Depravation”

Week Seven: Black Life/Death

Mon. 2/13: Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*, chapters 1 and 2, “The Wake,” and “The Ship”
[Supplementary text, **“The Position of the Unthought”*]

Wed. 2/15: Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*, chapters 3 and 4, “The Hold,” “The Weather”

Week Eight: The Female Black Body, Retrieved

Mon. 2/20: Presidents Day: No Class

Wed. 2/22: Kimberly Juanita Brown, *The Repeating Body*, “Introduction,” chapters 2 and 3, “Fragmented Figurations of the Maternal” and “The Boundaries of Excess”

Week Nine: The Female Black Body, Performed

Mon. 2/27: Kimberly Juanita Brown, *The Repeating Body*, chapter 4, “The Return” and “Conclusion”

Wed. 3/1: Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, “Introduction,” chapters 1 and 2, “Mammy Memory” and “Passing Performances”

Week Ten: Conclusions

Mon. 3/6: Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, chapter 4, “Is This Performance about You?” and “Conclusion”

Wed. 3/8: Options: 1) synthesis of course material, and consideration of analytical trajectories not (explicitly) addressed in this course (i.e., the turn in literary studies away from “social constructivism” and toward new materiality—biology, the non-human, object-oriented attachments/engagements) or 2) individual meetings to discuss the development of final papers. With this second option, office hours will take place in lieu of a class meeting.

The final paper will be due Wednesday, March 15th by 5:00pm. Please post your submissions on Canvas.

Class Presentation Rubric (20 points)

Score of ____ out of 20

Category	Highest Goals	Points	Comments
Preparation	The presentation paper, which is between 3 and 5 typewritten pages, is prepared beforehand, and submitted on the day the presentation is given.		
Content	The focus of the assigned reading is clearly and accurately explained. When possible, the presenter makes connections with other readings/topics of the course.		
Discussion Questions	The presenter offers 2 or 3 interesting, incisive questions that go beyond the obvious. These questions encourage peer participation and prompt a discussion.		
Organization	The presenter stays within the 10-minute presentation time. The presentation explains the focus of the reading, makes connections (when possible), and offers questions either during or at the end of the talk.		