U.S. Black Feminist Activism and Expression, 1850-2000
HIST 3301W/AMST 3950W
Spring 2014
Phillips Hall 329

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Office Hours: Thursdays 1:30-3:30

Course Description
In this seminar, we will study the history of the development and political and cultural expression of U.S. black feminism, the politics African American women developed to simultaneously counter both racism and sexism. We will also study the various formations of white supremacist patriarchy black feminists sought to counter. During the semester, students will develop multiple definitions of black feminism, reflecting the historical dynamics of racial and sexual discourse in the United States. Readings include historical monographs, slave narrative, speeches, essays, novels, and scholarly articles by black feminist artists, activists, and scholars from the antebellum period through the late 20th century. Assignments include reading responses, in-class presentations, and two significant papers based on class reading assignments and additional sources.

Learning Objectives
Students who successfully complete this course will learn:
1. The long history of black women’s confrontation with intersecting racism and sexism and their struggles to define an ideology and strategies to combat that particular oppression
2. To think critically about intersections between race, sexuality, and gender in the contexts of U.S. history and African American intra-racial politics
3. To critically engage the manifestations of intersecting racism and sexism and intra-racial gender politics in current social, political, and cultural discourses
4. To improve their ability to represent their critical engagement with these matters in writing.

Assignments
1. Reading assignments: carefully and fully read each assigned text for its overall themes and/or arguments and relevance to the course.
2. Reading responses: Each week (except when leading discussion), write a brief (one page) response to the assigned text, noting your scholarly reaction to it and two to three relevant questions it generates for you. These are to be submitted via Blackboard by 10am each Friday. (20% of final grade.)
3. Participation: Arrive at class on time, with the assigned books or articles in hand, having completed the day’s assignment. Join in the discussion of the assignment and relevant questions and issues from a place of informed, critical engagement. Note that mere attendance is not participation. (20% of final grade.)
4. Discussion leadership: Each student will lead at least one discussion, sometimes in conjunction with another student, depending on enrollment. Students will need to do some research to place the assigned reading and its author in context. This means reading one or
more scholarly reviews of the assignment, learning what else the author has published or plans to publish, and forming some conclusions about the text’s relevance to course themes. Present these findings (about 15-20 minutes), then lead the class into discussion with four to five questions for us to consider. If you miss your discussion leadership date, you will receive a failing grade of 0 on the assignment. (20% of final grade.)

4. Papers: Each student will write two papers of about 5-7 pages. (each 20% of final grade)

In one paper, you will discuss black feminist thought and activism through a particular African American woman, movement, or organization and provide a definition of black feminism for the era in which she or it was active. You might discuss a labor organizer, activist, poet, playwright, or politician. You might discuss the gender politics of a particular organization, political party, labor union, club, or informal network of colleagues. A list of primary and secondary readings is posted on Blackboard, and you are required to use secondary texts to inform and support your discussion.

In the other paper, you will write a black feminist analysis of a cultural text, such as a film, novel, substantial poem, image, or work of art, according to its form and historical context. The text need not necessarily have been created by a black woman or focus on black women’s experiences. Choose a text we have NOT read for class that is rich in racial, sexual, and gender themes. Analyze the text’s implications for black women’s oppression and advancement. For evidence to support your analysis, you should draw from the assigned texts, the attached list of primary and secondary readings, or other sources of history or film/literary criticism.

There are two paper due dates. You may submit either paper on either due date. However, the paper you submit on the first due date must consider the period before 1920, while the paper you submit on the second due date must address the period after 1920. No late papers will be accepted.

**Required Books**

Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*

Erin D. Chapman, *Prove It On Me: New Negroes, Sex, and Popular Culture in the 1920s*

Dayo Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War*

Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*

Pauline Hopkins, *Contending Forces, A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South*

Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Nella Larsen, *Quicksand*

Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South*


Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*

**Course Schedule**

January 17

Introduction
Establishing White Supremacist Patriarchy and its Antebellum Challenges
Week 2
Jan 24
Reading: Jennifer L. Morgan, “Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder”; Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies”; list of laws passed in colonial Virginia and Maryland on Blackboard

Jan 31
Reading: Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*; Sojourner Truth, “Woman’s Rights” and “When Woman Gets Her Rights Man Will Be Right” on Blackboard

Forging a Free State to Live In
Feb 7
Reading: Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*

Feb 14
Reading: Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*

Feb 21
Reading: Pauline Hopkins, *Contending Forces, A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South*

Feb 28: **First Paper Due via Blackboard**
Reading: none

Grounding Modern Black Feminisms
March 7
Reading: Chapman, *Prove It On Me*

March 21
Reading: Nella Larsen, *Quicksand*

March 28
Reading: Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*

Defining a Black Woman’s Movement
April 4
Reading: Toni Morrison, “What the Black Woman Thinks about Women’s Lib” and Frances Beale, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female” on Blackboard

April 11
Reading: Springer, *Living for the Revolution*

April 18
Reading: Walker, *The Color Purple*; and Walker, “In the Closet of the Soul” on Blackboard
Still Looking for a Free State to Live In
April 25
Reading: Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*

The second paper is due May 9 via Blackboard.