

Level: undergraduate upper division  
Focus: critical race and gender theory  
System: semester  
Class size: 5-10

## Utica College

# THE 400: Black Feminisms Onstage

### Spring 2020

**Credit Hours:** 3

**Prerequisites:** none

**Class Meeting Times:** MF 3:30pm-4:45pm

**Instructor:** Rachel M. E. Wolfe

**Office:** Library basement 110

**e-mail:** [rmwolfe@utica.edu](mailto:rmwolfe@utica.edu)

**Office Hours:** MF 12:30-2:30pm

In 1979, Alice Walker coined the term “Womanist” to describe black feminism, because, she believed, the feminist movement was so focused on the needs and rights of white women that the word “feminist” erased—and thus could no longer serve—the black community. In the years since, the theories and concerns of women of color, particularly black women, have moved from the margins to the center of feminist discourse, introducing most of the concepts the field is actively wrestling with today. At the same time, the theatre saw a parallel move from the practice of ghettoizing and tokenizing all non-dominant identities—such that black women playwrights were completely erased from a canon that viewed the black experience as male and the female experience as white—to the present celebration of “diversity” that has given us collections like *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color* and made Suzan-Lori Parks the most famous living American playwright. In this course, we will trace these parallel and related movements, looking at how black feminist (or, in some cases, Womanist) theory has shaped the writing of black women playwrights, and how their black female characters spread the messages of the movement in an emotionally engaged way. Our journey, thematic rather than chronological, will sample a variety of the theory, plays, and playwrights on offer in this category, mostly focusing on the U.S. but dipping a toe—and perhaps more—into the wide ocean of international and diaspora theory and theatre. As a small discussion course, this class will ask you to read, to think, to connect, and to communicate your thoughts to others on complex topics as a co-equal contributor to our joint quest for knowledge.

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

- Identify the most salient theoretical concepts to emerge out of the black feminist movement
- Read and understand advanced theoretical writing
- Analyze playscripts for the connections between structure, content, and cultural theory
- Identify and avoid practices of erasure in identity-based fields

- Express their ideas verbally in group discussion settings
- Present their own lived experience as expertise in leadership roles and group communication about identity-based theoretical concepts

## REQUIRED READING

Aidoo, Ama Ata. *Dilemma of a Ghost & Anowa*. London: Longman/Pearson (1995).  
**Available in the UC bookstore.**

Childress, Alice. *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White*. Location unknown: Samuel French, Inc. (1972).  
**Available in the UC bookstore.**

Hobson, Janell, ed. *Are All the Women Still White? Rethinking Race, Expanding Feminisms*. New York: State University of New York Press (2016).  
**Available as a free ebook through the UC library website.**

Hull, Akasha Gloria, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds. *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, but Some of Us are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. New York: The Feminist Press (1982).  
**Available as a free ebook through the UC library website.**

Nottage, Lynn. *Ruined*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc. (2009).  
**Available as a free ebook through the UC library website or in the UC bookstore.**

Parks, Suzan-Lori. *Red Letter Plays*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc. (2001).  
**Available in the UC bookstore and on course reserve at the UC library.**

———. *Venus*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc. (1997).  
**Available in the UC bookstore.**

Shange, Ntozake. *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc. (1997).  
**Available in the UC bookstore and on course reserve at the UC library.**

Course reader.

**Individual readings available on ENGAGE coursepage.**

## REQUIRED VIEWING

Suzan-Lori Parks, guest lecture at Hamilton College (Chapel), March 6, 2020, 7:30pm

## GRADE BREAKDOWN AND ASSIGNMENTS

Grades for this course will be calculated as follows:

Attendance and Participation	56% (28 class sessions at 2% each)
Reading Journal	20% (roughly 40 entries at 0.5% each)
Leadership Week	14%
Final	10%

As you can see, the bulk of your grade is based on sustained engagement over time, rather than a few big-ticket assignments. Specifics for each of these components is detailed below.

### **Attendance and Participation:**

The content of this course pulls from many authors and artists. Unlike a class with a unified textbook, where one thing flows naturally into another and builds on previous chapters, you cannot get the full impact or point of this class simply by doing the reading on your own. Our time in class together is a time for us to compare notes, explore ideas, and synthesize the very different readings we have done outside of class. As such, attendance and participation in class is very important; it is where we will make connections, refine each other's ideas, and otherwise progress toward a deeper understanding of our topic. For this reason, the bulk of your grade will be based on your continued, sustained engagement with the material and your classmates during our meetings.

Each day will earn points out of 5 as follows:

- ⤴ 1 point for showing up to class
- ⤴ 1 point for being present the entire class period (i.e. not coming late, leaving early, or ducking out in the middle)
- ⤴ 1 point for speaking up in class
- ⤴ 1 point for making a comment that proves you did the reading
- ⤴ 1 point for adding insight, stimulating critical discussion, lifting up a classmate, or otherwise going above and beyond with your comments

**Excused absences:** Excused absences will be issued in the case of illness, accident, or extenuating circumstance (ex: a relative's wedding, an away game, etc.) provided that the absence is cleared with me *by e-mail in advance*. Excused absences *will not be issued retroactively*, nor is an absence considered excused until I e-mail back with my approval. Excused absences earn 3 points for the missed day.

**Unexcused absences:** Any time you miss class without an e-mail from me excusing the absence is considered an unexcused absence. Each student will get one free (no grade penalty) unexcused absence per semester. Each successive unexcused absence will earn zero points for the day.

**Respectful engagement:** The free and critical exchange of ideas is largely what a university education is all about, and there is no topic that is off-limits in this class. Because the content of the readings in this class can be sensitive or triggering, it is vital that we approach all class discussions with respect for one another, and for one another's limitations. If someone feels the need to step out of a discussion, they must feel free to do so without fear of judgement from their classmates. If you disagree with something a classmate says in discussion, feel free to say so; but respectfully. While it is perfectly acceptable to disagree with ideas expressed by your classmates—and to refute those ideas with your own points—you must always direct your criticisms toward the points made and not toward the speaker. There is a difference between a disagreement and a personal attack, and personal attacks or insults toward a classmate will not be tolerated. Nor will derogatory remarks or slurs aimed at a larger social group (i.e. a particular race, gender, religion, etc.). It is important that you do participate in class discussion and engage with your classmates, but equally important that you do so in a manner that fosters respectful dialogue.

### **Reading Journal:**

The skills-based portion of this course has to do with improving your skill at reading and understanding feminist theory and theatrical artworks. In order to develop and hone this skill, you will keep a reading journal in which, for each reading we do, you will write down:

- 1) any unfamiliar words you encountered in the day's reading and their definitions
- 2) quotes that jumped out at you, and your reactions to them (EX: "WTF?! What does this even mean?" or "This is really profound" or "Totally true!" etc.)
- 3) your own summary of the central point or main takeaway from this reading
- 4) links to other readings we have done (not applicable to first reading journal)
- 5) any additional thoughts you want to share with me or write down for yourself (EX: "I really didn't agree with anything this author said, so here's my take on it" etc.)

You may get up to two points per element (one for simply doing it, the second for being thorough and/or insightful with that element) for a total of 10. If you didn't find any unfamiliar words, just say so, but be prepared to defend your claim in class when I ask you to define a complicated word from the reading! If your journal entry gives away the fact that you didn't read (i.e. your "main takeaway" is a thing brought up in the first paragraph and never returned to later in the reading), you will get zero points for the entry.

Journal entries are to be turned in on ENGAGE by the start of class on the day for which the reading in question is assigned. Because I want you to come to class prepared to talk about the day's reading, I will *not accept journal entries late* except in the event that you are excused from class that day due to illness or emergency. If you are in the hospital, obviously you will have time to do the reading later and make up the entry.

## **Leadership Week:**

Because one of the major interventions that feminist theorists of color have made in the field is to value diverse voices, this class is designed a little differently from most. I have selected readings and lesson plans for much of the course, but you, the students, will decide on the final third. If you glance at the schedule, you will see that five of the weeks have been left blank and labeled “Leadership Week.” For your major project/assignment in this course, each of you will take ownership of one of these weeks. For your leadership week, you will decide on a theme, choose readings, and lead discussion among your classmates. This assignment is a challenge, but also a way to honor your knowledge and interests, and allow you to learn what you want to learn in this course.

You should plan to schedule a private meeting with me sometime in the first half of the semester to discuss your ideas for your leadership week. Although the content is entirely up to you, you shouldn’t feel like you have to do this without assistance—it’s not a test. The book we will have just begun (*Are All the Women Still White?*) is full of feminist theory by many different individuals, and my office is full of plays by black women from various countries, backgrounds, and identities for you to leaf through and assign. Before your meeting with me, give some thought to what you’re most interested in and would most like to see in this course. Is there a particular theme or theoretical concept you’ve come across that you think needs attention? A particular country you’d like to read a play from? An intersecting identity (a religion, a sexuality, a disability, etc.) that you want to explore? We will not have time, in our sixteen-week schedule, to read even the entirety of the books I’ve assigned, let alone works by every black female playwright, so our course was always going to be choosing from a rich buffet of potential writers. This is your opportunity to choose the writers and concepts who appeal most to you, and to teach us, your classmates, about something we would not otherwise have known. Come to your meeting with some ideas about this, and I will be happy to help you find corresponding plays and theorists.

We will decide who is leading on what dates at the beginning of week two. The week before Spring break (week eight), your decisions for assigned reading will be due. Then finally, on your week, you will lead class discussion. By that point, you will be a pro on your subject if you are not already. Have fun! This is your opportunity to shine!

## **Final Exam:**

Another major intervention of feminist theorists of color has been to value the expertise that results from individual lived experience. By the time of our final, you will have spent a lot of time reading other people’s ideas about feminism, identity, blackness, and power structures. The final is a time to articulate your own ideas, and to draw on your own lived experience for what it can tell us about these themes. For your final, you will write either a personal manifesto or a reflective one-person show, which you will either read aloud or perform as appropriate for the class during our final exam time. I will collect the written version (manifesto or script), but as this is not a writing class, the bulk of your grade will be based on thoughtfulness of content and the performative addition it made to the knowledge of the class as a whole. This may seem

nerve-racking now, but trust me: by the time of the final exam, you will know these concepts and your classmates so well that this assignment will be challenging but fun rather than completely terrifying.

<b>Undergraduate Grading Scale</b>			
A	94 – 100	C	74 – 76.99
A-	90 – 93.99	C-	70 – 73.99
B+	87 – 89.99	D+	67 – 69.99
B	84 – 86.99	D	60 - 66.99
B-	80 – 83.99	F	0 - 59.99
C+	77 - 79.99		

## **POLICIES**

### **Academic Honesty:**

Academic honesty is necessary for the free exchange of ideas and Utica College expects academic honesty from all students.

Academic dishonesty includes both cheating and plagiarism. Plagiarism is the intentional or unintentional use of other people’s ideas, words, and/or factual information without crediting the source. Cheating refers to both the giving and the receiving of unauthorized assistance in the taking of examinations or in the creation of assigned and/or graded class work.

Utica College faculty are authorized to assign a wide range of academic penalties for incidents of academic dishonesty. Depending on the nature of the offense, the penalty may include a reduced grade for the particular assignment or course, or a grade of F for the course.

Incidents of academic dishonesty are reported to the Vice President for Academic Affairs who will refer any repeat offense, or any particularly egregious first offence, to the Academic Standards Committee, which may recommend a more severe penalty than that imposed by the faculty member.

Academic honesty and plagiarism prevention are topics that I take very seriously. Students are warned to review the Utica College academic honesty policy:

<http://www.utica.edu/academic/facultyinfo/honestypolicy.cfm>

If I find an instance of plagiarism, the student will receive a zero on the assignment in question and be reported to the Provost, who may impose further penalties.

### **Emergency Preparedness:**

Students are advised to review the campus safety information and procedures available at <http://www.utica.edu/finance/environment/safety/>, particularly the sections on lockdown and shelter-in-place procedures. In addition, any student with safety-related special circumstances to report (EpiPen, evacuation assistance, etc.) should come to office hours early in the semester to create an emergency plan with me. All students should be aware of the locations of the first aid

kit and fire extinguisher nearest to the classroom. I am Red Cross certified in first aid and CPR. If you have any emergency training or certifications, please let us know!

**In case inclement weather prevents our meeting in-person as a class, we may hold an electronic class session through ENGAGE instead.** In the event that a snowstorm or other weather emergency prevents me from getting to campus, I will post an announcement to the coursepage informing the class of the switch to an e-class for the day. During an e-class, you are expected to be logged in to ENGAGE during the regular class hour for the entire time and contribute to class discussions held via message board on the coursepage.

### **Students with Disabilities:**

I am committed to creating a supportive learning environment for students with disabilities. Any student who has need of special accommodations in this class due to a documented disability should speak with me as soon as possible, preferably within the first two weeks of class (my office hours are at the top of this syllabus). You should also contact the **Director of the Office of Learning Services (315-792-3032)** in order to determine eligibility for services and to receive an accommodation letter. We will work with you to help you in your efforts to master the course content in an effective and appropriate way.

I am equally committed to safeguarding my students' mental health. If you are feeling overwhelmed, anxious, or depressed and this class is contributing to your having unacceptable levels of stress, please come talk to me during office hours, so we can work out an alternate plan for your coursework that will enable you to be both healthy and productive. Also, don't be afraid to take advantage of the resources available through the on-campus **Counseling Center (315-792-3094)**: <https://www.utica.edu/student/development/counseling/> .

## **SCHEDULE**

### **WEEK ONE: Course intro**

#### **January**

#### **F 24 – Course intro**

### **WEEK TWO: Pedagogy**

#### **M 27 – Intergroup Dialogue**

#### **F 31 – Intro to Womanism**

Walker, "Women" (*Some of Us are Brave*)

Berry, "Foreword" (*Some of Us are Brave*)

Hull and Smith, "Introduction: The Politics of Black Women's Studies" (*Some of Us are Brave*)  
"Visions and Recommendations" (*Some of Us are Brave*)

### **WEEK THREE: Intersectionality**

#### **February**

#### **M 3 – Intersectional Theory**

Walker, "One Child of One's Own: A Meaningful Digression Within the Work(s)-An Excerpt"  
(*Some of Us are Brave*)

Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement" (*Some of Us are Brave*)

#### **F 7 – Intersectionality in Play**

Childress, *Wedding Band*

### **WEEK FOUR: Sexuality**

#### **M 10 – Black Lesbianism and Health**

Smith, "Black Women's Health: Notes for a Course" (*Some of Us are Brave*)

Chmielewski, "A Listening Guide Analysis of Lesbian and Bisexual Young Women of Color's Experiences of Sexual Objectification" (Reader)

#### **F 14 – Staging Alice Walker's *The Color Purple***

Norman, Russell, Willis, and Bray, *The Color Purple*:

<https://parksquaretheatre.org/wp-content/uploads/TheColorPurple2015.pdf>

<https://www.theatricalrights.com/show/the-color-purple/>

### **WEEK FIVE: Diaspora**

#### **M 17 – An African on the Diaspora**

Aidoo, *Anowa*

#### **F 21 – An African-American on Africa**

Nottage, *Ruined*

### **WEEK SIX: Theatricality**

**M 24 – Rep & Rev**

Parks, “Author’s *Elements of Style*” (*Red Letter Plays*)

Parks, *In the Blood* (*Red Letter Plays*)

**F 28 – The Scarlet Letter, the Red Letter**

Parks, *Fucking A* (*Red Letter Plays*)

**WEEK SEVEN: History**

**March**

**M 2 – Historiography**

Stetson, “Studying Slavery: Some Literary and Pedagogical Considerations on the Black Female Slave” (*Some of Us are Brave*)

Parks, “An Equation for Black People Onstage”

Parks, “Possession” (Reader)

**F 6 – Rep & Rev the history of Saartjie Baartman**

BlackPast, “(Sara) Saartjie Baartman (1789-1815)”

<https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/baartman-sara-saartjie-1789-1815/>

BBC News Magazine, “The Significance of Sarah Baartman”

<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35240987>

Parks, *Venus*

**REQUIRED ATTENDANCE at Suzan-Lori Parks’s lecture at Hamilton College, 7:30pm**

**WEEK EIGHT: Art**

**M 9 – Restructuring**

Suzan-Lori Parks’s Hamilton lecture

Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (Reader)

READING ASSIGNMENTS FOR LEADERSHIP WEEK DUE

**F 13 – Dance**

Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*

**WEEK NINE: SPRING BREAK!**

**NO CLASS—SPRING BREAK**

**WEEK TEN: Shifting Gears**

**M 23 – Beyond Womanism**

Hobson, “Introduction” (*Are All the Women Still White?*)

**F 27 – Hybridizing Diaspora and Intersectionality**

Sisteren Theatre Collective, *QPH*

**WEEK ELEVEN: Leadership Week**

**M 30**

**April**

**F 3**

**WEEK TWELVE: Leadership Week**

**M 6**

**F 10**

**WEEK THIRTEEN: Leadership Week**

**M 13**

**F 17**

**WEEK FOURTEEN: Leadership Week**

**M 20**

**F 24**

**WEEK FIFTEEN: Leadership Week**

**M 27**

**MAY**

**F 1**

**WEEK SIXTEEN: Course Wrap-Up**

**M 4 – Course wrap-up**

**FINAL: Friday, May 8, 4:30pm**