

Self & Other in Literature:

Femme Narrative & Queer Textuality *syllabus & reflection*

Race & Gender Theory in the Undergraduate Humanities Classroom

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Context:

This syllabus is a confluence of pedagogy and content from Race & Gender Theory in the Undergraduate Humanities Classroom, my overall coursework in the Language and Literacy MA program at the City College of New York, and my own research interests into digital writing, femme composition, and queer rhetorics.

In order to secure a course for the fall 2017 semester, my research partner, MFA candidate (soon-to-be-graduate!) Andréa Stella, and I proposed a queer narratives course to the Freshman Inquiry Writing Seminar committee at CCNY. The FIQWS program pairs first-year composition courses with topic courses in an attempt to foster collaboration amongst faculty and provide a scaffold for the first-year composition requirement. From the FIQWS mission statement: “central to the FIQWS is the fact that we believe freshman experience must reach far beyond the mastery of skills. FIQWS includes a glimpse of academic excitement and possibility in the heart of a new subject and the synergy of faculty and student investment. It is about harnessing the powerful intellectual energy within the institution; finding where the faculty energy is and couple it with student experience.”

To me, implicit within this statement is the aggressive inclusion of diverse authors, texts, and identities across all disciplines. However, upon our proposal submission, Ana Vasovic, the

FIQWS coordinator, responded by informing us that the previous FIQWS course on queer history received student complaints, so they did not plan to offer further queer studies courses.

Since I have approximately zero institutional clout, I decided to instead offer to teach the existing English course entitled *The Self & Other in Literature*, which Ms. Vasovic mentioned in our correspondence. The FIQWS structure, and the large number of courses offered in the fall semester, means that administrative oversight is relatively minimal; I can develop a syllabus that centers queer writing and other texts by marginalized folks *without* gaining institutional approval.

Because this is a first-semester course, I've worked to include some introductory work on textual analysis and rhetoric theory, and Ms. Stella is scaffolding her course around our assigned readings and the required first-year composition textbook, *The Norton Field Guide to Writing* by Richard Bullock, 4th edition. She also plans to incorporate discussions of the rhetorical canons, critical and close reading techniques, and some explicit identity-centered discussion.

Self & Other (Self & Student):

The majority of City College students are working class New Yorkers who have responsibilities outside of their student identities, especially as caretakers and financial contributors to their families. Many of these students also live with their immediate families (this semester, 28/28 of my English 21007: Writing for Engineers students live at home; ~20/28 have part-time or full-time jobs; a handful identify as “not confident” in their English language abilities; these stats were approximately the same in the fall 2016 semester). Thus, it's important to me to imbue my pedagogy with low-stakes activities, humanism, and compassion as much as possible.

I've surprised myself by adjusting to this reality extremely quickly, and I've been flexible with students surrounding assignment deadlines, including my decision late in the fall semester to implement a policy forgiving one late penalty for *any* assignment after the majority of my students missed deadline after deadline.

Even as a party-hungry undergrad, I literally *never* missed an assignment or turned in anything late. I honestly didn't think it was an option, so it never occurred to me to ask for an extension or to just take one without permission. Until recently, it never occurred to me that my comfort in the student role, despite my bouquet of mental illnesses, came from a deep white ethos, privileged in the sense that my mother holds a MA in Political Science, my father a PhD in Sociology, and high-achieving was a foregone conclusion regarding my own school performance.

In high school, I was the only student *ever* to earn a 100 on my entry assignment for the AP program I applied to (I created a fictional diary chronicling colonial life and politics in 1780s North Carolina); I was a National Merit Scholarship Finalist for my SAT score (I didn't study); I earned a *high pass* on my undergraduate literature comps (I didn't study). I knew what I could get away with, and turning in some subpar, procrastinated work was a way to challenge rules without too much risk, besides the occasional B+. I knew that mediocre work wouldn't allow my (white) professors to view my mediocrity as evidence of my race's mediocrity; my femaleness was similarly read as neutral at the large state university I attended for three years. I never noticed until I switched to Afro-American Studies as my major in my 2nd year; I was the farthest behind of all my (Black) classmates in terms of prior knowledge, and I was schooled more than once on my obliviousness to my own privilege.

Lit Review:

Considering my own experiences as instructor and student, white femme, disabled queer, coupled with what I'm learning about student needs, I've worked with a multiplicity of pedagogical texts in the development of this syllabus. Dana Ferris's influential text *Teaching College Writing to Diverse Student Populations* is a major source for many of the approaches chronicled here. The freewriting exercises that Stella and I have built into nearly every class period mirror Ferris's call for "low-risk fluency building" writing to build vocabulary, contextual awareness, voice, and confidence (89). Since the students will have agency over their own subjects, with the urging of a daily reflective prompt, within these low-risk writing activities, we hope that these personal writing spaces can also be a space for them to engage with what feminist composition scholar Michelle Payne terms "embodiment" in low-stakes student writing (qtd. in Micciche 136). Payne argues that when students are given space to compose their own texts, intimate details inevitably find their way into the writing. Payne sees this as advantageous for students to cultivate an authentic voice, which was a major point of discussion throughout our course this semester, and as an important facet of engaging with difficult texts. Esteemed scholar and activist bell hooks elaborates on this call for the personal in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, and even suggests that instructors "take the first risk, linking confessional narratives to academic discussion so as to show how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material" (21). Further, cultivating and encouraging the personal can further create space for instructors to learn about students on an individual basis, which Ferris also claims is integral to successful teaching of ELLs at all levels. I've also centered Kathleen Blake Yancey, Kara Tacsak, and Liane Robertson's text *Writing Across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing*, which calls for these low-stakes writing practices to cultivate "metacognition," or an awareness of themselves as

writers. This self-awareness is especially useful at City College, where so many students are focused on STEM, and often have a degree of discomfort communicating in academic writing.

I've also chosen to develop this course as hybrid, utilizing Blackboard and other digital spaces to augment reading and collaboration. As such, I have also chosen to incorporate multimodal elements into the required assignments in FIQWS; much of current discourse in composition studies revolves around the field's relationship with technology, and Ms. Stella and I are collaboratively developing our knowledge of scholarship on multimodal composing and rhetorical theory. Our interest in digital writing builds on linguist A. Suresh Canagarajah's expansive view of composing to include digital, aural, and visual components (440). Queer compositionists and digital writers Jacqueline Rhodes and Jonathan Alexander devote the entire text of *On Multimodality: New Media in Composition Studies* to multimodality theories and practices in composition spaces, and encourage instructors to not only incorporate multimodality into academic writing instruction, but to actually compose multimodally themselves (109). As we develop this course's hybridity, we believe this opportunity offers a fecund space for collaboration and expansion of digital literacies for us as two part-time instructors and rhetoric scholars. Our incorporation of non-text-based texts—and our emphasis on cultural context for texts—builds on Second Language Writing scholar Ken Hyland's concerns about “a more or less unproblematic category of ‘writing’” (426) in addition to the call for reimagining monolithic “academic writing” to include writing from other professional and personal contexts (427). All of these factors align more closely with our students' interests and fields of expertise, and we're hoping that STEM and humanities majors alike will respond positively to the opportunity to create digital artifacts.

“Readings”:

Literary Texts: *Heroines* by Kate Zambreno defies canonic genre while re-centering the trope of woman as muse in literature through the author reclaiming her weirdness. *Fierce Femmes & Notorious Liars* by Kai Thom Hang is a recent novel published by a queer-centric Canadian press, Arsenal Pulp, that blends political fantasy and slick prose into a memorable and genre-bending trans *bildungsroman*. Literature courses at CCNY are remarkably fetishistic surrounding gender and sexual minorities, and queer faculty are almost nonexistent, so this is a small but significant inclusion. *Pain Woman Takes Your Keys* by Sonja Huber, *When the Sick Rule the World* by Dodie Bellamy, and *my body – a Wunderkammer* by [Shelley Jackson](#) are multigenre and multimedia texts articulating femme experiences of illness and disability. *Bone Confetti* by Muriel Leung and *Citizen* by Claudia Rankine both play with poetics as mutable genres, and both center identity and authorship as crucial questions for new poetics.

Theory Texts: We’ve chosen to include nonbinary writer Joanna Hedva’s astounding work on [“Sick Woman Theory,”](#) where she muses on the relationships between capitalism, femme identity, and disability. She also has compiled an [in-depth bibliography](#) of disability writing, which we’ll be incorporating as a model for research practices. Sontag serves a similar purpose here in connecting illness/disability to larger models of iconography and power. The articles by Royster, Berlin, George, and Flower & Hayes center composition theory and introduce rhetorical terms into how we’re working with language and persuasion in this course.

Multimodal Texts: I have *loved* our discussions of incorporating music into humanities courses. Most of my students enter the classroom wearing headphones and keep them on until class begins (I often do too!), and even settle into their daily freewrites still sporting headphones

(we're a tech-inclusive class). I've developed [a Spotify playlist](#) of tunes that I like and tunes that I think correspond to the ethos of the course: the self and the other. I am planning to have the students contribute to this playlist as the semester progresses, and I'd like to create a YouTube playlist of striking videos for us to incorporate into class as well, much like the visuality and music groups incorporated into their presentations. Of course, Beyoncé's *Lemonade* stands out as an iconic contemporary exploration of self/other, as does the video for "Brujas" by Princess Nokia.

We also want to include non-musical visual texts that supplement our course readings and discussions. BuzzFeed does some great culturally-astute work on identity and intersectionality, so we've included [Questions Non Trans People Are Too Afraid To Ask](#) into our visual text section. I also snuck in a couple of favorites regarding disability, inspiration porn, person-first language debates, and women/femmes and disability by [Annie Elaine](#)y, one of my favorite disability activists, and [Jennifer Brea](#)'s TED Talk on her own struggles for medical care.

Sum:

Race & Gender Theory in the Undergraduate Humanities Classroom centered collaboration, revision, dis-composition, and discussion. While the FIQWS course described above carries institutional requirements, I am still committed to developing this course as digitally-inclusive and collaborative. The accompanying syllabus is emphatically in-progress; students will have full access to [an editable Google Doc](#), as this course will not follow a top-down educational model. Rather, Ms. Stella and I will rely on our undergraduates to engage in high levels of critical thinking and discourse from their very first semester of college. City College students are incredibly motivated and high-achieving, but there are very real cultural conditions that affect

how Ms. Stella and I see our roles as instructors, and how we engage with our students. As two white and highly educated teachers, often the only white people in our classrooms, we intend to continue developing this course with a commitment to digital egalitarianism, anti-racism, and critical engagement with power structures and rhetoric that affect our students' lives.

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