

Writing Literary History: Interrogating the Canon Through Self-Authorship

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The Western literary canon has long-been a significant source of debate within academic and non-academic institutions alike. In an attempt to evolve from the tedious back-and-forth and advance the existing narrative beyond mere impasse, this class will approach the discourse via critical essays regarding the value of canonicity as well as means of reconciliation, reclamation, and reorganization with respect to its current authorial composition.

The “point of entry” by which we will examine these arguments will be through readings of non-canonical (read: black, female, and queer) writers and their noted semi-autobiographical works in conversation with our own writing practices and output. We will individually and collectively dissect the following mix of literature and scholarship as writers and as “members of a privileged group who see themselves as entitled to articulate worlds in [emphasis added] words” (Linda Brodkey).

While engaging with the following texts as writers and contributing scholars, we will also be responding to the assignment and instruction of these texts with respect to both content as well as to their inclusion, organization, and presentation within this very syllabus and at each class meeting. Every participant and affiliate of this course is invited to annotate, amend, adjust, and append to this document in whichever mode is most accessible or convenient. Physical (digital) space to do so is provided throughout this document and the mode by which one contributes is discretionary (read: whatever works best for you!).

Class Pedagogy + Activity

Traditionally, “course objectives” would be outlined here. Yet, we are endeavoring to thoughtfully interrogate the value and persistence of an institutional linchpin like the canon through self-authorship and composition, and thus, we must employ a “system” that remains in keeping with that intention. The “objectives” and “outcomes” for this course will be self-authored, compiled, and mutually agreed upon in our first week of class.

As suggested by the title of this course and all of the mentions indicated above, this class will be writing intensive. There will be frequent free writing exercises as well as collaborative compositions drafted within our weekly in-class sessions. There will also be a series of four (4) longer-form writing assignments that will function as reflective responses to the literature we read. Though all writing submitted should certainly be representative of critical thought, it should also be reflective of the writer. Tone, form, positionality and presence within one’s writing is of the writer’s choosing, as is consistent with our interrogative methodology of self-authorship.

In-class discussions of the assigned novels will be directed by small, self-organized groups who will lead the larger class in an expansive dialogue on the given text's content, the experience of reading it, a reflection on it as writers, and/or any criticisms as scholars (read: "dealer's choice").

Peer reviews and self-assessments will be performed throughout the course. These evaluations will function as reflections on one's own evolution as a writer and as a practice in fostering the compositional output of one's peers and classmates. Thoughtful and considerate feedback is expected from each participant.

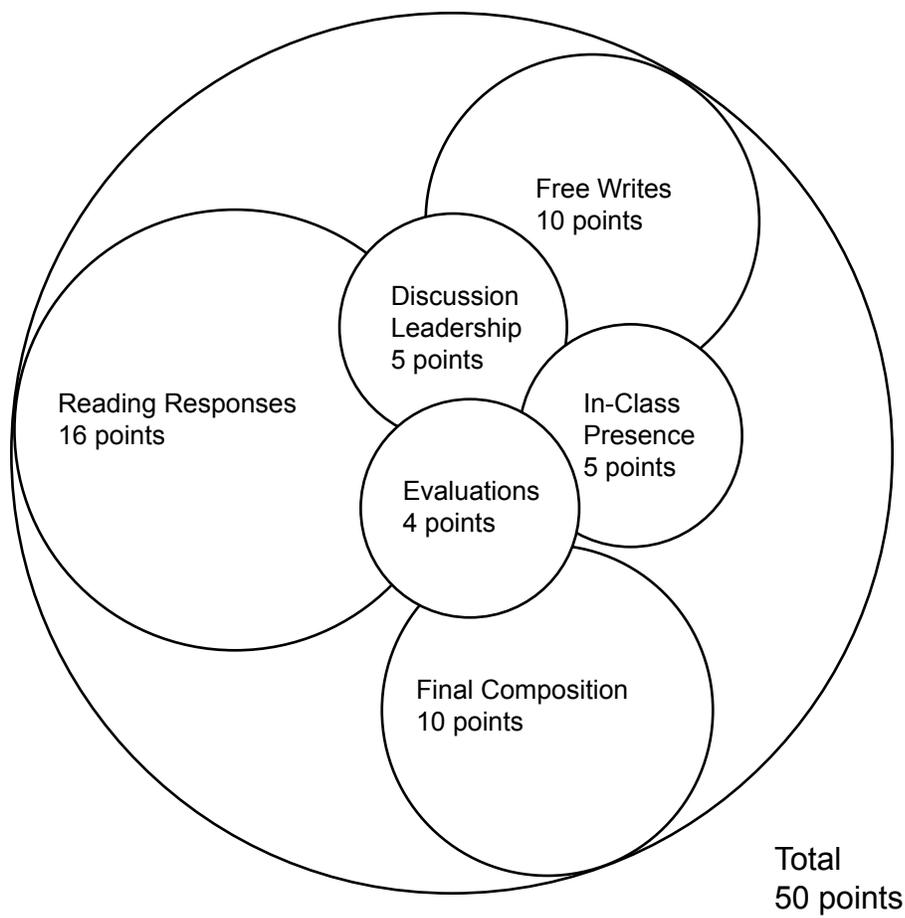
The course will culminate in a written composition, the exact topic (and form) of which will be decided by the writer and workshopped in small groups as we approach the "final" [1] class. In addition to the (digital) submission of a final written assignment, we will submit our final annotations on this syllabus as well as the collection of free writing exercises accumulated throughout the course.

[1] The language surrounding a final assignment can be limiting to critical thought. We are all invited to continue our interrogation of canonicity and the experience of self-authorship with respect to literary history beyond the limited temporal window of this course. As this assignment is to be submitted digitally, one is forever invited to return to it and perhaps evolve its ideas further.

“Evaluation” + “Assessment”

Similar to our disruption of traditional course objectives, we will explore alternative measures of grading and academic assessment. While we cannot do away with formalized evaluations entirely, we can approach a “rubric” of assessment that echoes our extended practice and methodology of self-authorship. In our first class, we will collectively outline a few tenets by which we will evaluate our own work, and, in turn, inform the final instructor-issued grade.

As a guiding structure, the following points-based rubric will be employed by the instructor, though the details will be distilled in our first class.



All special learning needs will be accommodated by both instructor and peers to the best of our abilities. Please see the instructor whenever and if ever your needs have not been met.

Racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, and ableist language is inappropriate in any classroom but perhaps more so in this course, given our chosen content and methodology. Any behavior that violates this basic expectation of peer conduct will be addressed immediately.

Readings + Accessibility

Though one is free to physically acquire the assigned novels and essays, all readings will be provided digitally, meaning access to an internet enabled device is imperative. Any issues or concerns regarding access to the assigned content or the digital platform upon which they will be made available should be conveyed to the instructor as soon as possible.

Our commitment to self-authorship as a methodology approach as well as an in-class practice is extended to the manner and means in which one writes. There are no specifications as to writing implement or device but remain mindful that all in-class exercises will be submitted at the conclusion of the course.

Self-Authored + Collective Course Objectives

(space provided for ideas, notes, and contributions)

Course Calendar

Week One

In-class

- + Introductions (via “Think-Pair-Share” exercise)
- + Review of syllabus and articulation of “course outlines” and confirmation of measures of evaluation
- + Read “MLA Rankings of American Writers” and Sam Sacks’ “Canon Fodder: Denouncing the Classics” in small groups

Week Two

Read

- + Jacqueline Jones Royster’s “When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own” (1996)

In-class

- + Free write exercise(s)
- + Class discussion and reflection on canonicity with respect to Royster’s rhetoric

Weeks Three + Four

Read

- + Paule Marshall’s **Brown Girl, Brownstones** (1959)

In-class

- + Directed discussions and/or presentations by individuals or small groups and related activities

Week Five

Composition (To Be Submitted)

+ Written response to **Brown Girl, Brownstones**

Read

+ Glyne A. Griffith's "Marxism: Reading Class in Anglophone Caribbean Literature" (2011)

+ Rinaldo Walcott's "Genres of Human: Multiculturalism, Cosmo-politics, and the Caribbean Basin" from Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis (2015)

In-class

+ Writing workshops for reading responses

Weeks Six + Seven

Read

+ Chester Himes' **Yesterday Will Make You Cry** (1952)

In-class

+ Directed discussions and/or presentations by individuals or small groups and related activities

Week Eight

Composition (To Be Submitted)

+ Written response to **Yesterday Will Make You Cry**

Read

+ George E. Haggerty's "The Gay Canon" (2000)

+ Charles I. Nero's "Towards a Black Gay Aesthetic: Signifying in Contemporary Black Gay Literature" (1991)

In-class

+ Writing workshops for reading responses

Weeks Nine + Ten

Read

+ Zora Neale Hurston's **Their Eyes Were Watching God** (1937)

In-class

+ Directed discussions and/or presentations by individuals or small groups and related activities

Week Eleven

Composition (To Be Submitted)

+ Written response to **Their Eyes Were Watching God**

Read

+ Patricia Hill Collins' "Work, Family, and Black Women's Oppression" from *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1999)

+ Introduction of Jacqueline Jones Royster's to *Traces Of A Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women* (2000)

In-class

+ Writing workshops for reading responses

Weeks Twelve + Thirteen

Read

+ James Baldwin's **Go Tell It On the Mountain** (1953)

In-class

+ Directed discussions and/or presentations by individuals or small groups and related activities

Week Fourteen

Composition (To Be Submitted)

+ Written response to **Go Tell It On the Mountain**

Read

+ Joyce A. Joyce's "The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism" (1987)

+ Kya Reaves and Ebony Z. Gibson's "To Belong or Not to Belong?: A Literature Review to Determine the Past, Current, and Future States of the African American Canon" (2013)

In-class

+ Writing workshops for reading responses

Week Fifteen

In-class

+ Writing workshops for final compositions and written projects in (rotating) small groups

Week Sixteen

+ Submission of final composition via email

+ Submission of annotated syllabus

+ Submission of free writes and in-class exercises

Amendments, Adjustments, Etc. on Syllabus

(space provided for ideas, notes, and contributions)

