**bell hooks BOOKS:**

**FROM FEMINISM TO AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

ASRC 3700/6700

(Also FGSS 3701/6701, ENGL 3775)

Fall 2013

W 2:00-4:25pm, Building and Room TBA

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**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course focuses on the study of race, class, gender, sexuality and popular culture through the examination of scholarly works and creative writings by one of the most compelling and legendary voices in black feminism: bell hooks. hooks is one of the most prominent and prolific black feminists in academia known for her signature writing style that is highly accessible, that sometimes incorporates the colloquial, and that draws on strategies such as using the personal while eliminating formal footnotes and bibliographies traditionally included in academic books. Through these methods and her unique voice, hooks has invented the engaging style in which she writes.

Within her vast repertoire of writing, she has produced several series and trilogies, including sustained dialogues on topics such as love and teaching. She has written over forty books across various genres, including works on spirituality and self-help, poetry and children’s books. hooks’s extensive repertoire of book-length works is fascinating not only because it is so prolific, but also because it reaches such an expansive audience outside of academia, from community organizations to prisons. In this sense, hooks’s work challenges us to unsettle the conventional meanings of the intellectual that have predominated in academia. Moreover, it is important to recognize her as one of academia’s most innovative essayists whose dialogues have appeared in a diverse array of popular magazines such as Ms., Z Magazine and the Shambhala Sun.

In her work, hooks has frequently discussed what it means to write and is a useful model to draw on for pondering processes of coming to voice as a writer, along with strategies for writing creatively and experimentally as an academic. She is also a valuable example for the levels on which she has consistently put into practice the feminist idea that the personal is political in her writing. hooks is known for her coining of a litany of critical terms, including concepts such as “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.” Beginning in the early 1990s, hooks emerged as one of the most sought-after and acclaimed public speakers on lecture circuits from campuses to community settings. During this period, her work gained increasing salience in the national media and her reputation consolidated as a “public intellectual.” hooks, who has been herself at times critical of this categorization, represented one of the few black women within these ranks. Indeed, in her scholarship, hooks has frequently critiqued the marginalization and devaluation of black women’s work in black intellectual history, as well as in the mainstream academy. Her origins in Kentucky in the Appalachian South have importantly shaped her intellectual vision and approaches and make her work relevant to areas such as cultural geography, regionalism, Southern studies and environmental studies.

By drawing on hooks as an intellectual model and tracing the development of key concepts and arguments within her repertoire in this course, we will gain a sense of the construction of a black female subject in various phases of life and the fashioning of a black feminist intellectual. We will trace her fascinating journey as a writer, activist, scholar and artist to think through the making of a raced, sexed, gendered and classed subject, along with politics of nationality, from the post-civil rights era into the new millennium. hooks’s intellectual example is all the more significant when considering that she wrote her first book at age nineteen, just as women’s studies was gaining increasing legitimacy as an academic field and was being institutionalized in the academy, and its conventional white-centered definitions of “woman” that excluded black women and other women of color were increasingly being challenged and contested. While hooks is best known for her prolific and insurgent work in the field of feminism, she has also importantly contributed to scholarship on race, class, art, film, and critical pedagogy.

In this course, we will consider hooks’s body of work produced in various career stages, beginning with the classic Ain't I a Woman, and explore her writings in multiple genres, from her art book and autobiographies to her children's books and poetic writings. We will discuss key critical terms and themes in her repertoire and consider her major contributions to both black and feminist intellectual history while examining some of the key debates in which she has participated within feminist discourses. hooks’s extensive contributions to film studies will make it useful for us to draw on a range of films throughout the course, including productions such as Paris is Burning, Precious, and Beasts of the Southern Wild. We will also draw on videos of her interviews and talks that are available on the internet on sites such as YouTube. Furthermore, it is phenomenal that the Facebook site dedicated to hooks (https://www.facebook.com/pages/Bell-Hooks/22762902634) has drawn a following of nearly 50,000 “fans” at this point. hooks’s vast repertoire holds important implications for fields such as popular culture, cultural studies and critical theory. She has vitally shaped studies of sexuality and has also notably been one of the most vocal black intellectuals in challenging homophobia. Moreover, she has been vocal in critiquing heterosexist and homophobic conceptions of black masculinity premised on patriarchal values.

This course will serve as a valuable resource for those who are invested in areas of study from feminism to sexuality studies and will reinforce understanding in those areas. hooks’s work is remarkably interdisciplinary and because she has contributed to multiple scholarly areas, reading her work is useful for gaining understanding in fields beyond feminism. It will be productive to consider the implications of her work for areas such as Africana studies and black studies, Africana women’s studies, black feminism, American studies, critical theory and cultural studies, including black popular culture.

In general, the methods and approaches of this course will reinforce and increase skills in closely studying and reading the work of a single author. They affirm the value in this focused method of intellectual investigation and in intensive reading for pondering broader questions related to gender, race, sexuality, identity, culture and society. Studying bell hooks in this course will be a valuable, inspiring and tremendously rewarding endeavor. This process holds rich rewards for students regardless of their discipline. It holds unique and distinct rewards for those journeying toward scholarly development as intellectuals and teachers who are cultivating their own distinct and unique intellectual profile and identity, including skills in critical thinking. The course will reinforce skills in academic writing and academic essay development. It will expand literacies and skills in writing for purposes of publication, including skills in using and evaluating media- and internet-based forums for dialogue. It will also consider questions related to the utility, appropriateness and value of creative and experimental writing, including strategies for effectively writing about the personal. hooks’s repertoire is equally useful and practical to draw on given her reflections on teaching and the meditations that she frequently incorporates into her writing on what it means to cultivate “ways of being” as an intellectual.

For undergraduates, the course may be particularly useful in introducing feminist and cultural theory, including studies of popular culture, along with a range of other fields. It will build skills in reading and gaining mastery of the repertoire of a single author. It will reinforce skills in critical thinking, research and writing and promote more critical reflection on pedagogy and education, teacher-student relationships, the classroom and university as contexts.

**Texts:**  
  
bell hooks.  Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism (1981)  
bell hooks.  Feminist Theory:  From Margin to Center (1984)

bell hooks.  Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics (1990)  
bell hooks and Cornel West. Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life (1991)  
bell hooks.  Black Looks: Race and Representation (1992)

bell hooks.  Art on My Mind: Visual Politics (1995)  
bell hooks.  Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood (1996)  
bell hooks.  Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life (1997)

bell hooks.  All About Love: New Visions (1999)

bell hooks.  We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity (2004)  
bell hooks and amalia mesa-bains.  Belonging: A Culture of Place (2009)  
bell hooks.  Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom (2010)  
bell hooks.  Appalachian Elegy: Poetry and Place (2012)

bell hooks.  Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice (2013)

bell hooks’s work is highly engaging and accessible, yet simultaneously challenging. Within her dialogues on teaching, she has frequently referenced the concept of “engaged pedagogy” to describe the ideal openness of the classroom and teacher-student exchanges. I suggest that hooks’s writing is most productively approached through strategies of “engaged reading” and intense critical reflection. It is definitely a good thing that hooks’s prolific body of writing is now actually far too extensive to study comprehensively and in its entirety in a single semester-long seminar. Nevertheless, our examination of selected works in areas such as feminism and gender studies, cultural theory, film, art, memoir, and pedagogy will provide students with an understanding of her diverse critical investments and of the scope, depth and range of her intellectual itinerary as it has developed over the past several decades.

We will examine a substantial portion of hooks’s body of work and pursue our reading of her texts in an order that is chronological in most (though not all) instances. Such an approach will allow us to trace the development of her intellectual agenda. Ain’t I a Woman and Feminist Theory, the first readings on our agenda, are two of the three works that she has produced focusing mainly on feminist theory and that were primarily designed to both challenge and critique Second Wave feminism and to accord more legibility to black women and other racial and ethnic categories within this discourse. These readings will be particularly useful to compare and contrast for a sense of how her feminist epistemology emerged and developed at the earliest points in her career. Students with the time and interest might also consider pursuing an independent reading of Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics (2000) to continue tracing her thinking within her body of book-length dialogues primarily invested in feminist theory. hooks’s approach to feminist theory in her work is highly intertextual. It is marked by a striking coherence and ongoing and recurring themes across the varying genres in which she produces. Ain’t I a Woman also introduces hooks’s earliest reflections on the status of black lesbians within feminism. These comments proved to be problematic for some critics such as Barbara Smith and anticipate hooks’s later writing on sexuality.

Yearning is a volume that continues and builds upon hooks’s primary investments in feminism, but also signals her interest in cultural theory, including areas such as film studies. hooks’s book entitled Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black (1989), too, compellingly integrates these concerns. These interests are developed all the more in her volume Black Looks, which is masterful in the range of theorizing that it offers on topics such as black femininity, black masculinity and gay subjectivity. We Real Cool, a title that invokes the classic poem by Gwendolyn Brooks, builds upon the dialogue on black masculinity that hooks measurably expands in her essays such as “Reconstructing Black Masculinity” and “Is Paris Burning?” in Black Looks. Masculinity is also the topic of The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love (2004). The dialogues in Breaking Bread with Cornel West are one of the earliest of several book-length collaborations that hooks has produced in essay and interview format within her writing repertoire. They ponder topics from the status of the black intellectual to homophobia in black communities. hooks makes a vital contribution in Where We Stand: Class Matters (2000) in focusing primarily on discussion of class as an identity category.

Art on My Mind represents another important heading in hooks’s repertoire in introducing art as a central object of concern. Its critical and sometimes personal reflections on the work of numerous contemporary artists are the outgrowth of hooks’s commitments as both an artist and art collector, showcase her acumen as an art and architecture critic and serve as an important signpost in contemporary art criticism while making a valuable contribution to cultural studies. hooks’s book-length study of film, Reel to Reel: Race, Sex and Class At the Movies(1996), similarly underscores hooks’s mastery as a film critic.

Bone Black is hooks’s first memoir, a deeply poetic work. It allows the author to immerse herself fully in writing through the personal voice that had emerged in her scholarly criticism. Unlike some other disciplines, feminism has operated on the presumption that “the personal is political” and resisted presumptions that invoking the personal and the process of theorizing are mutually exclusive. hooks’s strategies of incorporating the personal into her academic writing reveal her ongoing investments in autobiography as a form and genre. This book is also significant for having been published during a time in which many academics were publishing memoirs and debates were underway about the uses of the personal in academic writing. While Bone Black primarily focuses on her childhood, Wounds of Passion is another compelling autobiographical work that discusses the various challenges that hooks sometimes encountered as she pursued her education in institutions that she sometimes found to be alienating, and considers her emerging feminist consciousness and the impact of her personal relationships on her intellectual formation during this period. Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work (1999) is another selection in this genre that draws primarily on the personal.

All about Love is the initial installment of hooks’s “love trilogy,” which also interestingly complements Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison’s serial writing on this topic in literature. The other selections include Salvation: Black People and Love (2001) and Communion: The Female Search for Love (2002). This dialogue is further extended in The Will to Change. These books fall primarily within the multiple volumes that hooks has produced focusing on spirituality, healing and self-help. Selections grounded in this genre include Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery (1993) and Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem (2003). Both Belonging and Appalachian Elegy reflect on place, another recurring motif in hooks’s writing.

hooks has importantly contributed to dialogues related to the politics of negotiating issues of gender, class, race, and sexuality in the classroom. Her body of writing on teaching allows her to explore these concerns in more depth and reflects her ongoing commitment to theorizing about pedagogy and her mastery as a teacher. Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom(2010) is the third volume within the outstanding trilogy of work that hooks has produced on teaching, which has been grounded primarily in critical pedagogy. Students who want to explore this aspect of her repertoire more extensively should follow up our reading of this selection by taking up its two predecessors, Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom (1994) and Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope (2003).

Writing Beyond Race, like hooks’s volume Killing Rage: Ending Racism(1995), focuses primarily on race as a topic. This volume’s consideration of films in contemporary culture makes it particularly useful to study. This book might also be thought of as a follow-up to hooks’s earlier groundbreaking volume of essays in the area of cultural criticism entitled Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations(1994).

In reading hooks’s work, it will be very useful to record notes on the major concepts that she introduces. That she is a consummate essayist with such an original and distinctive writing style also makes the organization and form of her essays useful to consider alongside their content. The cross-section of works that we are considering within hooks’s vast writing repertoire is highly accessible, and simultaneously dense. This is the kind of work in which it is easy to get lost if one falls too far behind. We will be covering roughly one book by hooks per week, which makes it absolutely crucial to keep up with the reading in the course and to complete the assignments on time.

A few critical studies have been published on aspects of hooks’s work, which might serve as valuable research tools in this course. Catherine R. Squires’s bell hooks: A Critical Introduction to Media and Communication Theory(2012) draws on hooks’s interest in media and popular culture. We can also consider Maria del Guadalupe Davidson and George Yancy’s Critical Perspectives on bell hooks (2009), which looks at hooks’s contributions to critical thought. Namulundah Florence’s bell hooks’ Engaged Pedagogy: A Transgressive Education for Critical Consciousness (1998) focuses on hooks’s contributions to critical pedagogy. It is likely that the number of critical studies that focus on hooks will only increase as time goes on. A filmic treatment of hooks is provided in Bell Hooks: Cultural Criticism & Transformation (1997). hooks’s work has also been frequently anthologized and she has contributed to various critical volumes.

**COURSE FORMAT AND ASSIGNMENTS**

The main requirement of this course is an analytical paper. The graduate paper should be 15-20 pages in length. One approach might be to draw on one or two books by hooks for a critical discussion of one of the primary concerns of her discourse. Style manuals that you might consult as you develop your papers include Kate Turabian's A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations, The Chicago Manual of Style: The Essential Guide for Writers, Editors and Publishers, Joseph Gibaldi's MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing, and Claire Kehrwald Cook's Line by Line: How to Improve Your Own Writing. The paper will count for 60% of your final grade.

The undergraduate paper should be 10-12 pages in length. Please use the MLA style. For reference, see the MLA Handbook, Seventh Edition. The paper will count for 30% of your final grade.

**Graduate and undergraduate papers are** **due in the Africana Center office by Friday, December 13 at 5:00 p.m**.

As a precursor to and component of this final assignment, all students are required to produce a 500-word précis outlining the paper. **The précis is due Wednesday, November 6.** This assignment will establish foundations for your paper.

**The undergraduate midterm is scheduled for October 23 during our regular class session.** The midterm will count for 15% of your final grade. **The undergraduate final is scheduled on Thursday, December 12, from 7-9 pm in our regular classroom.** The final will count for 15% of your final grade. Examination books will be provided.

Students are required to keep a reading journal for the course in which they produce weekly reflections on hooks’s writings that we are studying. This journal will also serve as a valuable resource for class discussions and for recording class notes, will be reviewed periodically, and will count for 15% of the final grade.

In addition, you are required to make a presentation during a session of class this semester, which may occur with or without a partner. In this presentation, you should present a short paper with summary and commentary sections on the text under discussion, along with at least six substantive and well-thought-out questions. Copies should be distributed to the class and two copies should be submitted to the instructor. This assignment will count for 10% of your final grade.

Your class participation and attendance are required in this seminar and will count for 15% of your final grade. On a weekly basis, lectures in the course will be complemented by discussion in which **ALL** class participants and course auditors should engage. Keep in mind that because the course meets just once a week, missing even a week amounts to missing nearly **three** days of instruction and all of the coursework that would normally be distributed across them, which is the equivalent of a whole week of class. While the schedule allows time for more focused and independent study, it is important to be responsible and to attend the class sessions.

**COURSE SCHEDULE**

August 28 Course introduction

**Open Feminist Criticism**

September 4Ain’t I a Woman

September 11 Feminist Theory

**New Directions in Cultural Criticism: Race, Gender and Sexuality**

September 18 Yearning; selected essays from Breaking Bread

September 25 Black Looks; selected

essays from Art on My Mind; screening of the film

Bell Hooks: Cultural Criticism Transformation and

clips from Paris is Burning

**Writing the Self**

October 2 Bone Black

October 9 Wounds of Passion

**Self-help**

October 16 All About Love; discussion of selected poems

by bell hooks

October 23 **Undergraduate midterm examination; review of**

**undergraduate journals; Graduate**

**consultation or mid-semester reading period**

**Negotiating Race, Gender and Sexuality in the New Millennium**

October 30 We Real Cool

November 6 Writing Beyond Race; screening of scenes from

Precious and Beasts of the Southern Wild; **précis**

**due**

**Critical Teaching**

November 13 Teaching Critical Thinking

**Homeplaces**

November 20 Belonging

November 27 **Thanksgiving break, no classes**

December 4 Appalachian Elegy;

discussion of selected children’s books by bell

hooks; course conclusion