

**BLST 236/SWAGS 330**  
**Black Sexualities**

Amherst College  
Fall Semester 2015

Prof. Khary Polk  
Office Hours: Tu/W 3-4 or by appointment  
Email: kpolk@amherst.edu

Class Time: TTh: 2:30-3:50 PM  
Classroom: CHAP 119

Books: Siobhan Brooks, *Race and Erotic Capital in the Stripping Industry*; Samuel Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*; Audre Lorde, *Zami*; Mirelle Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography*; Janet Mock, *Redefining Realness*; Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*

**Course description:** From the modern era to the contemporary moment, the intersection of race, gender, and class has been especially salient for people of African descent—be they men, women, children, queers, transpeople or those who flout the boundaries of such categories. How might the category of sexuality act as an additional optic through which to view and reframe contemporary and historical debates concerning the construction of black identity? In what ways have traditional understandings of masculinity and femininity contributed to an understanding of African & African American life and culture as invariably heterosexual? How have black lesbian, gay, and transfolk effected political change through their theoretical articulations of identity, difference, and power? How have their bodies been surveilled by the state, and how have they contested that surveillance? What would it mean to center trans lives in discussions around anti-black racism and police brutality? In this interdisciplinary course, we will address these questions through an examination of the complex roles gender and sexuality play in the lives of people of African descent. Remaining attentive to the ways black people have claimed social and sexual agency in spite of systemic modes of inequality, we will engage with critical race theory, black feminist thought, queer-of-color critique, literature, film, music, “new media” and erotica, as well as scholarship from anthropology, sociology, queer theory, and history.

**Method of evaluation:** Each student will be required to write a midterm essay (5-7 pages), a final essay (6-8 pages), do an in-class presentation of one week’s readings, as well as to keep a class reading response journal. The journal is a space to meditate upon themes distilled from course readings, films, classroom discussions, as well as the larger, contemporary world as experienced through the framework of our class. Beginning in week two, you are required to complete ten journal entries, which should be no more than one page, single-spaced in length. You may choose to keep your entries in an online blog (via blogspot, wordpress, tumblr, etc.), or you may send them to me via email or Moodle. At the end of the semester, these entries will be compiled into a *portfolio* (the details of which will be given in a separate document) to be submitted alongside your final paper.

*Attendance in this course is mandatory.* Upon missing your third session, your grade will begin to drop by 1/3 with each subsequent missed class. In the end, though, you will want to attend class, not out of fear of penalty, but because it is interesting and you need it to understand the material.

### ***Schedule of Readings***

**\*\*\*Please note\*\*\*— The syllabus provides a map for the course. As such it may be adjusted, as necessary, during the course of the semester.**

September 8: Introduction

#### **Intersectionality in Thought and Practice**

September 10: Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color”; Kylan Mattias de Vries, "Transgender people of color at the center: Conceptualizing a new intersectional model"

September 15: Jennifer Morgan, “Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder”: Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770”; Oyeronke Oyewumi, “Visualising the Body: Western Theories and African Subjects”

September 17: Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”; Jasbir K. Puar "" I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess": Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory." *philoSOPHIA* 2.1 (2012): 49-66.

#### **Black Power & Masculine Anxiety**

September 22: Eldridge Cleaver, from *Soul on Ice*

September 24: Class cancelled

September 29: Huey Newton: “Eldridge Cleaver: He is no James Baldwin”; James Baldwin, from *No Name in the Street*, 164-173; Film: *Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin*

#### **Black Feminist Politics & Embodiment**

October 1: Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*

October 6: Combahee River Collective statement; Zethu Matebeni, "Feminising Lesbians, Degendering Transgender Men: A Model for Building Lesbian Feminist Thinkers and Leaders in Africa?" *Souls* 2009 11 (3); Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: the Erotic as Power”

October 8: Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*; Film: *The Watermelon Woman* (Cheryl Dunye)

October 13: [Monday class schedule--no class]

#### **Queer of Color Critique**

October 15: Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*; Film: *The Watermelon Woman* (Cheryl Dunye), continued

October 20: Jose Munoz, “Performing Disidentifications”; Cathy J. Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” Film: *Chocolate Babies* (Stephen Winter)

October 22: Bad Subjects in the Archive I: Gladys Bentley, "I am a Woman Again" in *Ebony Magazine* (1952)

**Optional reading:** Carmen Mitchell, "Creations of Fantasies/Constructions of Identities: The Oppositional Lives of Gladys Bentley"

### **Souls of Transfolk**

October 27: Roen, K. "Transgender Theory and Embodiment: The Risk of Racial Marginalisation."; C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn, "Trans necropolitics: A transnational reflection of violence, death, and the trans of color afterlife"

**Optional reading:** A. Finn Enke, "The Education of Little Cis: Cisgender and the Discipline of Opposing Bodies"

October 29: Janet Mock, *Redefining Realness*; Gabrielle Le Roux, "Proudly African and Transgender"; Film, *Still Black: Portrait of Black Transmen* (Kortney Ryan Ziegler)

November 3: Film: *Paris is Burning* (Jennie Livingston); bell hooks, "Is Paris Burning?"; Ashley Clark, "Burning down the house: Why the debate over *Paris is Burning* rages on"

November 5: Class cancelled

### **Bodies in Contact, Bodies for Sale**

November 10: Samuel Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*

November 12: Bad Subjects in the Archive II: Film: *Portrait of Jason* (Shirley Clarke); Film: *The Fear of Disclosure Project: Je Ne Regrette Rien = No Regret* (Marlon Riggs)

**Optional reading:** Dagwami Woubshet, "Archiving the Dead: AIDS Obituaries and Final Innings" (57-84);

**Special event: Thursday, November 12 at 7:30 PM: Screening of Jason and Shirley with director Stephen Winter**

November 17: Miller-Young, Mireille. *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography*; Film: *Lialeh* (1974; available online)

November 19: Siobhan Brooks, *Race and Erotic Capital in the Stripping Industry*

November 24 & 26: Thanksgiving Break

### **Visibility and Sexual Identity in Africa & the Diaspora**

December 1: Ashley Currier, "The Rise of LGBT Organizing in Namibia and South Africa (25-50); Dagwami Woubshet, "Epistles to the Dead: AIDS Orphans and the Work of Mourning" (111-144)

December 3: Binyavanga Wainaina, "I am a homosexual, Mum."  
<http://africasacountry.com/2014>; Ashley Currier, "Homosexuality is African: Struggles 'To Be

Seen" (121-150); Film: *The New Black: LGBT Rights & African American Communities* (Yoruba Richen)

### **Trapped in the Closet**

December 8: Film: *Trapped in the Closet* (R. Kelly)

December 10: C. Riley Snorton, "Trapped in the Epistemological Closet: Black Sexuality and the 'Ghetto-centric Imagination'"; Tavia Nyong'o, "Trapped in the Closet with Eve"

December 15: The Future(s) of Black Sexualities