

PSC 371  
MW 3:30-4:45, Hawkins 143  
Office: Hawkins 149G (inside Political Science suite)  
Office Hours: Mon. 2-3pm / Wed. 4.50-5.30pm / Thur. 2-3.30pm / other times, email me

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## **AFRICAN-AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT** **Spring 2019**

### **About the Course**

What is the political connection between Frederick Douglass in the 19th century and Beyoncé in the 21st century? What are the historical antecedents of #BlackLivesMatter? To examine questions such as these, this course evaluates the history and the present of African-American political theory and practice, through an analysis of theoretical texts, pamphlets/manifestos, and popular culture from the periods of the abolitionist movement, Reconstruction, civil rights, late 20th century black feminist thought, and contemporary African-American politics and culture.

This course emphasizes the way that black activists, scholars, and/or artists have responded to eternal questions in political thought about freedom, oppression, resistance, citizenship, democracy, etc., from the standpoint of blackness in the United States. Moreover, the course is not just African-American Political Thought, it is also *American* Political Thought, insofar as black theorizations and experiences of America provides a vital framework for interrogating American-ness, citizenship and non-citizenship, American slavery and its afterlives, inclusion and exclusion, liberation and domination, and ultimately what “America” is and what it does (and perhaps could) mean to be American. The class also seeks to examine the intertwining of black pasts, presents, and futures; we will constantly analyze how the historical figures we engage with help us think about race in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Black Lives Matter and the backlash to it, the potentialities and obstacles to liberation, and so on. Finally, the main project in this class will connect the intellectual work of the course to SUNY Plattsburgh’s past, present, and future as we put on an exhibition (in the library and online) of the history of black scholars, activists, and artists who visited campus in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This class will be run as a seminar. You are expected to do all of the reading and to come prepared to critically discuss them in class—this way, we can learn from each other and collectively explore black politics. You are to bring the reading(s) to class everyday.

### **Course Learning Outcomes**

By the end the semester, students should be able to successfully:

1. Demonstrate understanding of African-American politics and political thought, and of the various forms that political thought takes, such as theoretical texts, pamphlets/manifestos, film, art, music, etc.
2. Explain African-American political thought in the context of American history and politics more generally.
3. Critically reflect on issues of race (including their intersections with those of gender, class, and sexuality), both historically and in the present

4. Demonstrate knowledge of the way that political thought reflects concrete conflicts and inequalities in society.
5. Analyze theoretical material and artifacts of popular culture.
6. Communicate about contentious issues in a professional way.

### **General Education Learning Outcomes**

This class fulfills the Humanities 5HUM General Education requirement. Following a course in this category, students will:

- Understand the conventions and methods of at least one of the humanities
- Demonstrate understanding the complexity of our world,
- Demonstrate understanding of aesthetics,
- Identify the great ideas and cultures of the world,
- Explain the moral responsibility of the individual,
- Communicate effectively in written and oral expression, and
- Filter, analyze, and critique information and experiences.

### **Evaluation**

- Class citizenship, including attendance: 20%
- Class blog: 20%
- Take-home essays: 30% (3 essays, 10% each)
- Final assignment: 30% (Exhibition work = 20%; Paper = 10%)

**Grading:** Grades will be assigned in accordance with the SUNY Plattsburgh College Catalog: *Superior:* A (92.5-100), A- (90-92.4); *Above Average:* B + (87.5-89.9), B (82.5-87.4), B- (80-82.4); *Average:* C+ (77.5-79.9), C (72.5-77.4), C- (70-72.4); *Passing but unsatisfactory:* D+ (67.5-69.9), D (60-67.4); *Failing:* E (0-59.9)

### **Assignments**

- Class citizenship (20% of overall grade): I care about whether you come to class and the role you play in it; our class will be most rewarding if you attend regularly, and if you are an active citizen. I expect you to come on time, to listen, and to participate. I also realize that being sick, taking mental health days, and other things are a part of life. After three absences, the class citizenship part of your grade will decrease for each additional absence; if have a long-term health issue or any kind of emergency that is going to keep you out for two class sessions or more in a row, be in touch so we can work out alternate arrangements. When you miss class, contact a classmate, and then come to me with questions about the reading, things you'd like to discuss, needed clarifications.

Class citizenship, however, entails more than just showing up, it also means participating in class.

- Doing the reading is part of your classroom citizenship.
- Participation can take many different forms: asking questions about unclear concepts or materials, raising ideas we as a class or the author may have overlooked, respectfully sharing opinions, volunteering to read passages aloud, visiting office hours, contributing to class discussions in large and small groups without monopolizing conversations, paying attention to me and to your classmates, and taking risks when there are questions asked that have no clear answers. Participation

does not only mean talking—it also means working to be aware of the space you inhabit and how you can best contribute to an atmosphere of supportive learning.

- I understand that speaking in class can be challenging. We will have a number of different kinds of discussions to encourage participation, and you should use the blog as a way of preparing ideas to bring to our class sessions. Regularly coming to office hours and discussing the readings can contribute to your class citizenship grade as well, as does asking questions in class.
  - Last but not least, class citizenship means being receptive of and interested in others' political and philosophical perspectives, respectful of experiences different than your own, and open to having others disagree with you.
- Class blog (20% of overall grade): Throughout the semester, we will make a class blog, using WordPress. During the first week of class, I will lead a brief WordPress tutorial and distribute instructions on joining WordPress and becoming a member of the blog. You are required to write one post of at least 250 words + 1-3 discussion questions once per week; in addition, you must make 2 comments (at least 50 words each) per week on others' posts. Posts are due by midnight the night before class, on the readings to be discussed the next day; comments can be made at any time during the week. The class will be split into groups during the first week of class, and the group you are in will determine what days you are required to write a post. The posting schedule will be passed out and uploaded to Moodle.

The blog is *not* intended to be a place for you to summarize the readings, but rather to interpret and analyze them. Your blog posts can take many forms: offer a critique of the reading, connect it to contemporary or historical events, relate it to earlier readings in the course, offer a close reading of an especially important or interesting passage, and much more. We will use responses and discussion questions in each class session. *A secondary goal of the blog is to familiarize you with the WordPress platform, gaining a skill set relevant for work in the many advocacy groups, media companies, organizations, and businesses that use WordPress or similar content management systems/web platforms.* In order to encourage you to grapple with difficult ideas and challenge your own views, this will be a private blog visible only to our class.
  - Take-Home Essays (30% of overall grade): There are three take-home essay assignments throughout the semester. Two essays will be due on 3/13; one essay will be due on 4/29. They will require you to write approximately 1500 words each, will not require any outside research, and you will have the assignment at least one week before the due date.
  - Final Assignment (30% of overall grade): For the final assignment, we will be putting on an exhibition (online and in Feinberg Library) to highlight and contextualize the history of black activists, scholars, and artists who presented or performed on campus from approximately 1960-1990. You (on your own, or in a pair) will choose an individual from a list of visitors to campus during that time period, research their political thinking and contributions to black politics and culture, and prepare exhibition material on that figure. The exhibit opens on May 1; you will submit a research paper on the figure you choose during finals week.

The goals of the project are for you to: become familiar with and analyze a figure from 20<sup>th</sup> century black politics and culture; develop research skills, including archival research; help create a public, visible project bringing knowledge of SUNY Plattsburgh's black

political and cultural past to the campus community; and develop presentation and logistical skills. We will work on this project as a class throughout the semester, including two different visits to the library in the first half of the semester, a work day in the library to prepare for the exhibition, and the exhibit public opening and presentation.

### **Texts**

The following books are required. They are available in the bookstore for purchase and rental. If you plan to buy/rent them elsewhere, please be sure to buy the same edition as listed below (hint: search by ISBN number). We will read them in the order listed (note that you need Rankine and Lebron immediately, and all other material will be provided through the course Moodle.

- Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Graywolf Press (ISBN 978-1555976903)
- Christopher J. Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea*, Oxford University Press (ISBN 9780190601348)
- W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Dover Thrift Edition (ISBN 978-0486280417)
- Octavia Butler, *Kindred*, Beacon Press (ISBN 978-0807083697)

You are required to have the reading(s) with you in paper or electronic (see below) form for every class session. Regularly not having the readings with you will lower your class citizenship grade.

### **Inclusivity and Classroom Environment**

The diversity of this classroom and campus is a strength. I intend to cultivate a classroom environment that is attentive to and respectful of diversity in its many forms, including but not limited to the intersections of race, gender and gender identity, sexuality, class/socioeconomic background, ability, age, culture, national origin, religion, and political and philosophical opinion. I strive for inclusivity in education, understood as a demonstration of equity through awareness, understanding, and respect for the ways that the differences, identity, culture, background, and experience, and socialization impact how we live and learn. Please let me know if something said or done in the classroom, by either myself or a fellow student, is particularly troubling.

I believe that the best way to learn and engage with the course material is adopting a critical perspective. I expect us to challenge all taken for granted assumptions, including our own. To this end, we have to first give all arguments the benefit of doubt, learn how these ideas are constructed, and how they operate in our political world. This class is an open floor for all types of ideas as long as we acknowledge that there might be fundamental differences in our opinions and political positions, cultivate respect for each other, and avoid discriminatory language.

Further, disagreement (including with me!) is inevitable in a political science class, and can be generative for everyone in the room, so long as it proceeds equitably. A diversity of opinions and experiences can be a source of learning for us all. It is also likely that readings in this class will contradict your beliefs. My conviction is that, as the [American Association of University Professors writes](#), this kind of challenge “is inevitable in classrooms if the goal is to expose students to new ideas, have them question beliefs they have taken for granted, grapple with ethical problems they have never considered, and, more generally, expand their horizons so as to become informed and responsible democratic citizens.”

## **A Note on Language and Course Content**

We will read and watch/listen to texts in which “n\*\*\*\*r”—a racist slur—and “n\*\*\*\*a”—a re-appropriated colloquial/slang alternative—are used. This does not make it okay for myself and for non-black students to use the slur or its derivate/alternatives, and thus re-enact violent, racist histories. Non-black speakers will say “the n-word,” even if quoting directly from someone using the terms in course material. Black speakers can decide for themselves whether to use the full version of the terms or to use “the n-word.” Many of the texts we will read or listen to will use the term “Negro,” which is no longer in regular use and can be offensive depending on the context. When quoting directly from course material, you can use the term; if speaking generally/from your own standpoint, use the term “black person/people.” Similarly, many texts will use the now outdated and potentially offensive term “colored,” as in “colored person” or “colored people.” If quoting directly, you can use those terms; if speaking from your own standpoint, use “person of color” or “people of color.”

Much of what we read and watch/listen to will discuss, depict, visualize, and/or represent racial violence, including lynching, murder, sexual assault, and rape. I am here if you want someone to talk to about the possibly-traumatic character of some of the course material. You should also feel welcome to step away from a classroom conversation if you need to. If there are other ways I can support you amid difficult material, please do not hesitate to talk to me.

## **Gender Pronouns**

All people deserve to be addressed in accordance with their identity, ranging from preferring a nickname to your gender pronouns. Students are encouraged to notify me of their gender pronouns so I can address you correctly (she, he, they, ze, etc.), especially if they have reason to believe I may refer to you by the incorrect pronoun. I use he/him/his pronouns.

## **Accessibility and Student Support Services**

It is the policy of the College that any student requiring accommodations of any kind to fully access this course must be registered for accommodations with the Student Support Services office located in the Angell College Center. If you need any accommodations for this course, please contact Student Support Services at 518-564-2810.

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. If there are ways I can assist you in reaching your full potential in class, please talk to me or email me. Please feel free to bring and use (quiet) fidget/stim toys in the classroom.

## **Learning Center**

The Learning Center (101-103 Feinberg) offers many resources that may be useful for this course, including free appointment and walk-in tutoring, academic peer mentoring, “academic personal trainers,” and more. Visit the [Learning center website](#), contact them, or ask me for a referral. I am also available to answer any questions, to help with readings, to brainstorm, to assist on assignments, to offer advice, and more – email me or drop-in during office hours.

## **Technology**

Numerous studies (for example [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#); for an overview see [here](#)) demonstrate that, on aggregate, students taking notes by hand learn information more effectively

and receive higher grades than those taking notes electronically, even when those on devices are exclusively focused on class tasks (which is hard to do!). Moreover, many of us (myself certainly included) find it difficult to pull ourselves away from social media, news, etc. when we have screens in front of us. Finally, in a class that will involve lots of discussion with one another, screens, alerts, and notifications can distract you and your classmates, and can impede the conversations that will be essential to our experience in the course this semester.

Nevertheless, many of our readings for the course are in PDF/electronic form, and I recognize that laptops/tablets are essential to the learning of many students. So, while I encourage you to print out course materials and take written notes, you may use laptops and tablets for referencing readings and taking notes in class; you may NOT use your phones. Any in-class use of technology (e.g., laptop, tablet, etc.) or other activity that is disruptive to your fellow students or to me will result, without warning, in your citizenship grade going down. If you have concerns or want to talk to me for advice on technology use, please come talk to me.

### **Academic Honesty**

It is expected that all students enrolled in this class support the letter and the spirit of the Academic Honesty Policy as stated in the College Catalog.

Academic misconduct and dishonesty—such as cheating, plagiarism, submitting someone else’s work as your own, submitting work from other classes without permission, etc.—are serious offenses. Such acts violate the trust that forms the foundation of the student-teacher relationship, they take away opportunities to learn, and they discount the work of others, including peers, faculty, and scholars. In particular, plagiarism constitutes intellectual theft and is unacceptable. Any acts of suspected academic dishonesty, including plagiarism, will be addressed through the [Suspected Academic Dishonesty Procedure](#).

### **Other course policies and notes**

- Check your email regularly – I will do the same for you.
- If a student has a desired name that is not listed on my course roster, please let me know.
- I strongly encourage you to come visit my office hours, even if only to chat; if the times listed don’t work, email me so we can figure out another time to meet.
- If you are struggling with any aspect of the course, talk to me sooner rather than later so we can work on the ways to best help you. Please also consider visiting the Learning Center.
- If you would like a little bit of extra credit, email me a cute animal picture by 3:00pm on January 30 to demonstrate that you have read all way through the fine print of the syllabus
- If a religious holiday that you observe conflicts with an assignment, please let me know in advance so that we may discuss alternate options.

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### **READING SCHEDULE**

*Read the listed text(s) before coming to class for that day (earlier, if you are writing a blog post for that day). The schedule is subject to change at the instructor’s discretion; any changes will*

be announced in class and/or over email. When there are multiple readings, please read them in the order listed.

## **I. Racial Presents, Racial Pasts**

**1/28:** Introductions

- In-class: watch and discuss Beyoncé's *Lemonade*

**1/30:** "All the meanings behind the retreating seconds"

- Read, annotate/mark-up the syllabus, and bring questions
- Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), read chap. I-V (pp. 1-79)

**2/4:** Encountering Antiracist Violence

- Rankine, *Citizen*, read chaps. VI-VII (pp. 81-end)
- Christopher J. Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea* (2017), read Introduction and Afterword

## **II. Abolition and America**

**2/6:** Abolitionist Appeals

- David Walker, *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1830), Preface and Article I
- Frederick Douglass, "The Anti-Slavery Movement" (1855), "The Rights of Women" (1848),
- Chernoh Sesay, Jr., "Historicizing Freedom and Black Abolitionism" (2017), *Black Perspectives*
- Joy James, *The New Abolitionists* (2005), "Introduction: Captivity and Democracy"

**2/11:** Abolition, Slavery, and America

- Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" (1852)
- Childish Gambino, "This is America," music video (2018)
- Neil Roberts, "This is Your America: Why Frederick Douglass Still Matters" (2018), *Public Seminar*
- Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter*, pp. 1-21
- For the last half of class, we will make a visit to College Archives and Special Collections in Feinberg Library and meet with librarians Debra Kimok and Tim Hartnett; meeting place for first half of class TBA

**2/13:** Black Women and Abolition

- Maria Stewart, "Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall" (1833)
- Frances E.W. Harper, "Liberty for Slaves" (1857), "Bury Me in a Free Land" (1858), "We are All Bound Up Together" (1866)
- Sarah Forten, "The Grave of a Slave" (1831), "The Abuse of Liberty" (1831), "The Slave Girl's Address to Her Mother" (c. 1831)
- Adam McNeil, "The Importance of Sarah Forten's Abolitionist Poetry" (2018), *Black Perspectives*

## **III. Reconstruction and Jim Crow**

**2/18:** W.E.B. Du Bois

- W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Souls of Black Folk" (1903), Forethought and chaps. I-III
- Booker T. Washington, "Atlanta Convention Speech" (1895)

**2/20:** Du Bois

- Du Bois, *Souls*, chaps. IV-VII

**2/25:** Du Bois

- Du Bois, *Souls*, chaps. VIII-X

**2/27: TEACH-IN**

- No-class; you are required to attend a session of the social justice teach-in

**3/4:** Du Bois

- Du Bois, *Souls*, chaps. XI-XIV, Afterthought

**3/6:** Theorizing Jim Crow America

- Billie Holliday, “Strange Fruit” (1939)
- Ida B. Wells, “Lynching: Our National Crime” (1909)
- Anna Julia Cooper, excerpt from *A Voice from the South* (1892)
- LeBron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter*, pp. 21-34

**3/11:** The New Jim Crow

- Kendrick Lamar performance of “Alright” at 2015 BET Awards Kendrick
- Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, Revised Edition* (2012), “Introduction”
- June Jordan, “Jim Crow: The Sequel” (n.d.)
- Cornel West, “Foreword,” in Alexander, *The New Jim Crow, Revised Edition* (2012)
- LL Cool J, “Illegal Search” (1990)
- 2Pac, “Trapped,” music video (1991)

**3/13:** ESSAYS DUE

- In-class: research visit to the library, with librarian Joshua Beatty

Spring Break

#### **IV. Black Freedom Struggles in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century**

**3/25:** Nina Simone, King, and Malcolm

- Nina Simone, listen to “Mississippi Goddam” (1964), “Backlash Blues” (1967), “Why (The King of Love is Dead)” (1968). “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black” (1969)
- Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963)
- Malcolm X, “Message to Grassroots” (1963)

**3/27:** Black Power

- Excerpts with Angela Davis in *The Black Power Mixtape* (2011)
- Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, excerpts

**4/1:** James Baldwin

- James Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook: A Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of Emancipation” (1962)
- Baldwin, “We Can Change The Country” (1963)
- Baldwin, “The American Dream and the American Negro” (1965)
- Baldwin, “The White Man’s Guilt” (1965)
- LeBron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter*, chap. 4

## **V. Black Feminism**

### **4/3: An Introduction to Black Feminism**

- bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: from margin to center* (1984), chap. 2, “Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression”
- Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990/2000), chaps. 1-2 (“The Politics of Black Feminist Thought” and “Distinguishing Features of Black Feminist Thought”)

### **4/8: Gender, Sexuality, and Black Feminist Politics**

- Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” (1980/1984) and “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism” (1981)
- Cathy J. Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” (1997), *GLQ* 3
- Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter*, chap. 3

### **4/10: Black Feminism and Freedom**

- Combahee River Collective, “Combahee River Collective Statement” (1983)
- Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, “Introduction,” *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (2017)
- Barbara Smith and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, “Barbara Smith,” in *How We Get Free*

## **VI. Time, Exile, Slavery, Freedom: Kindred**

### **4/15: Octavia Butler’s *Kindred***

- Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (1979), pp. 9-107
- Charles Pulliam-Moore, “The *Kindred* Graphic Novel...” (2017), *io9*

### **4/17: *Kindred*, continued**

- Butler, *Kindred* pp. 108-201

### **4/22: *Kindred*, continued**

- Octavia Butler, *Kindred*, pp. 202-end
- Eileen Donaldson, “A contested freedom: The fragile future of Octavia Butler's *Kindred*,” (2014), *English Academy Review*

## **VII. 21<sup>st</sup> Century Black Politics and Culture**

### **4/24: Black Lives Matter**

- The Movement for Black Lives, “A Vision for Black Lives” policy platform (2016)
- Barbara Ransby, *Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the Twenty-First Century* (2018), “Introduction” and chap. 5, “Themes, Dilemmas, and Challenges”
- Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter*, chap. 5

### **4/29: Exhibit workday; essay due**

### **5/1: Exhibit opening**

### **5/6: Film, Political Thought, Racial Capitalism**

- Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter*, chap. 2
- Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (2016), chap. 1, “A Culture of Racism”

- In-class: watch *Sorry to Bother You*, dir. Boots Riley, 2018
- 5/8:** Film, Political Thought, Racial Capitalism
- Robin D.G. Kelley, “What Did Cedric Robinson Mean by Racial Capitalism?” (2017), *Boston Review*
  - Barbara Ransby, *Making All Black Lives Matter* (2018), Conclusion
  - In-class: watch and discuss *Sorry to Bother You*

**Finals week begins**