

HDS 3263/REL 1087/AAAS 326: Black Religion and Sexuality

Harvard Divinity School
Fall 2023

Wednesdays 3-5pm
Swartz 118 Garvin Room

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This course examines the co-constructed histories of religion, sexuality, and race in the Americas from the vantage of the African diaspora. Drawing upon foundational and newer works in the field, we will explore how the construction of these categories, largely rooted in biological essentialism, has had immense consequences for the enslaved and their descendants, indigenous peoples, other people of color, and women, queer, transgender, and gender-nonconforming individuals. This course also homes in on how those marginalized by these categories have challenged and subverted them using a hermeneutics of suspicion, political organizing, and other methods of resistance and feminist and queer theologizing.

Required Texts

1. Daniel Black, *Black on Black: On Our Resilience and Survival in America*
2. Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*
3. Monique Moultrie, *Hidden Histories: Faith and Black Lesbian Leadership*
4. Eziaku Nwokocha, *Vodon En Vogue: Fashioning Black Divinities in Haiti and the United States*
5. Deesha Philyaw, *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies*

Books required for the course are available at the Harvard Coop Bookstore. The other texts (articles, book excerpts) in the syllabus are available in either the Reserves or Course Files section of Canvas. Most, if not all of the assigned books, have digital versions available through Harvard University Library.

<https://tinyurl.com/Place-Fall-Book-Order-Here>

Evaluation

Seminar Requirements:

1. Weekly Canvas Discussion Post (10%)
2. Lively and engaged participation in seminar (15% of grade)
3. One class facilitation* (20%)
4. One annotation of a keyword, due on **October 20** (25%)
5. 12-15-page final essay; or digital humanities project; or TBD... is due on **December 12** (30%).

***Class facilitation:**

- Prepare a 10-12-minute presentation on the assigned texts to generate conversation in response to your questions. This presentation should balance critique and contextualization of the assigned texts(s) in question within the larger field of African American religious history.
- Utilize THOMAS* (see below) to ground the discussion in the contributions of the author(s).

For SAT/UNSAT: All of the requirements must be fulfilled at a passing level (C grade or higher).

Regarding AI: Not allowed in this course at all. If used, you will receive a failing grade.

Please refer to “Rules Governing Academic Integrity” in the Harvard/HDS Student Handbook.

Leading Discussion

THOMAS: A Useful Mnemonic for Reading Historical Scholarship

Source: Dr. Danna Agmon, Virginia Tech

When reading works of historical scholarship, the following mnemonic is a helpful tool to keep in mind as you prepare for class. All the questions are key for understanding the book/text, but they are arranged in ascending order of importance, from least to most important.

Topic: The basic questions: When? Where? What is this book/text about?

Historiography: What are the multiple scholarly conversations in which this work participates? What does it add to these conversations?

Organization: what is the central organizing structure of this work? Chronological? Thematic? Geographic? Are there any narrative devices put to use? How does the organization advance the argument?

Method: What sources are used in this book/text? How is this evidence analyzed? Is there an overarching theoretical or conceptual approach? How does the theory intersect with the evidence?

Argument: What is this author’s original thesis? What new thing does it explain?

So what? This could be rephrased as “significance” or “stakes.” What is important or useful about this book/text, beyond the confines of the topic? Put differently, why would nonspecialists in the field care to read this book/text?

Office Hours

with Professor Greene-Hayes, by appointment via Zoom.

- To schedule an appointment: <https://calendly.com/agreenehayes>.

with Siobhan Kelly, Wednesdays 1-3pm in Swartz Hall Common Area.

- To schedule an appointment: <https://calendly.com/siobhankelly/black-religion-sexuality-office-hours> (the link requires students to make an appointment before midnight on Wednesday).

Keyword Guidelines

Due October 20th by 5 p.m. by email to ahmadg@hds.harvard.edu

Write one annotation of a keyword* (1500-2000 words).

*Keyword – “A word or idea that serves as a solution or explanation for something; a word, expression, or concept of particular importance or significance” (Oxford English Dictionary).

Please feel free to pick *any* keyword from our readings or lecture that you would like to annotate, define, contextualize, and assess using the literature from the course.

You should include the following information in your keyword:

1. Give your understanding of the overall theme, meaning, or main point of the keyword (often in keyword essays there is no one “thesis” per se, rather an account of many intersecting meanings, connotations, and implications. What sits at the crux of these intersections? Consider, for example, the keyword and encyclopedic entries from Week One.)
2. How have the texts you’ve read so far in the quarter used the keyword? How does the keyword relate to “Race, Sexuality, and Religion”? What debates circulate around the keyword? How has it been used or misused? Why is the keyword important?
3. What passages (no more than 2 verbatim) do *you* think gets at the heart of the keyword?
4. Outside of the assigned readings, what other materials might help you describe, define, and discuss the keyword? Are there any songs, films, newspaper clippings, or other forms of media that help elucidate its significance? How is the keyword depicted in popular culture?
5. How does the keyword differ in varying geographical or temporal contexts?

Additional Instructions:

- Please feel free to consult the recommended readings listed on the syllabus and/or to consult a librarian for other resources to help with your assignment.
- Do not hesitate to solicit feedback from me as you organize your material and thoughts.
- All essays should be typed in 12-point, Times New Roman font, include 1-inch margins, be double-spaced, and include page numbers. Please send as .doc, .docx, or .pdf.
- **PLEASE BE AWARE OF THE UNIVERSITY’S POLICY ON PLAGIARISM.**
- For citations, please use the Chicago Manual of Style, footnotes. And please note that footnotes do not count towards your word count (1500-2000 words).

Grading Rubric:

- Was this keyword essay proofread for spelling, grammatical and typographical errors, choppy transitions, colloquial phrases, and awkward uses of terms?
- Does this keyword essay provide sound evidence to support its claims, using assigned and recommended reading materials and other supporting secondary and primary sources?
- Does this keyword essay use inclusive and/or gender-neutral language where appropriate?
- Did the author address the above required guidelines as appropriate?

Final Project Guidelines

Due no later than 5 pm on **December 12, 2023**, via email to ahmadg@hds.harvard.edu

Overview

The primary stipulation of the Final Project/Paper is that it must center “BLACK RELIGION AND SEXUALITY.” Keep in mind that the Project/Paper is designed to begin from but take you beyond the materials covered in the course. Your Projects and Papers should clearly identify your research question(s).

Bibliography/Citation

Your bibliography should reflect a Project that engages at least 10 sources, 3 of which derive from the syllabus, and either of which can extensively frame or merely supplement your project. Sources can include a mixture of credible websites, articles, newspapers, videos, books, etc. Your bibliography, however, should not be ALL of any one type of source (e.g. 10 books). For citation purposes, use Chicago Manual of Style footnotes and then fully cite sources in your bibliography. Additional information can also be found [here](#).

Submission

Please remember that it is your responsibility to ensure I receive your Project or Paper on time.

Please save your file as “First Name, Last Name – Final” in .docx or .pdf for papers.

Papers/Creative Writing (10-20 pages, excluding bibliography)¹

- be sure to make an explicit claim/argument/thesis
- should be double-spaced in 12-point font, and include 1-inch margins and page numbers
- Additional grading criteria: clear argument or main idea, innovation, mechanics, organization, cohesion and clarity

Video Projects: Short Films/Documentaries/Oral Histories/Mini-Ethnographies

- minimum 10 minutes long, maximum 15 minutes
- high quality upload to Youtube (stable video and audio; should not look or sound like a bad bootleg!)
- if conducting interviews, submit list of interview questions, interviewees (real names or pseudonyms), and interview date(s), all of which you can run as the “credits.”
- give an overview of your research findings and its implications at the beginning or end of your video
- Additional grading criteria: conceptual clarity, creativity, and implications/findings statement

I am open to other possible creative project ideas, but you must get approval before submission.

Grading Rubric

- Was this assignment proofread for spelling, grammatical and typographical errors, choppy transitions, colloquial phrases, and awkward uses of terms?
- Does this assignment provide sound evidence to support its claims, using assigned and recommended reading materials and other supporting secondary and primary sources?
- Does this assignment use inclusive and/or gender-neutral language where appropriate?
- Did the author address the above required guidelines as appropriate?

Plan accordingly, do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns, remember

¹ The longer page limit may prove especially useful for creative writing assignments, which could, for example, be a short story or poetry series that is 7-10 pages, and include a separate, 5-page paper that offers an analysis of the story or series and explicitly connects it to themes we have explored in the course. Keep in mind that for creative writing projects, this analysis can often be incorporated into the actual project.

Course Schedule, Agreements, and Reading Assignments

The syllabus is an outline of the course. It is subject to revision as needed, especially during these trying political and social times.

Week 1. September 6, 2023

Introductory Meeting: please read the following short essay in preparation.

Marlon Bailey and L.H. Stallings, "Sexuality" in *Keywords for African American Studies* (2018)

Week 2. September 13, 2023

Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*

Discussion Leader(s): _____

Week 3. September 20, 2023

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "The Politics of Respectability" in *Righteous Discontent*, p. 185-229.

Rebekah Trollinger, "Rebecca Jackson and the Problem of Celibacy." *Religion and American Culture* 32, no. 3 (2022): 375-404.

"Rebecca Cox Jackson" in Pollitt, Turpin, and Stabel, eds., *Radicals, Volume 2: Memoir, Essays, and Oratory: Audacious Writings by American Women, 1830-1930* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2021), 145-50.

Alice Walker, Review of *Gifts of Power* in *The Black Scholar*, 1981.

Discussion Leader(s): _____

Week 4. September 27, 2023

C. Riley Snorton, "Black Sexual Syncretism" in *Nobody Is Supposed to Know* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 94-120.

Wallace Best, "Everybody Knew He Was 'That Way': Chicago's Clarence H. Cobbs, American Religion, and Sexuality During the Post-World War II Period" in Sorett, *The Sexual Politics of Black Churches*

Tim Retzlöff, "'Seer or Queer?' Postwar Fascination with Detroit's Prophet Jones." *GLQ* 8 (3): 271-96.

Judith Weisenfeld, "Real True Buds" in Frank, Moreton, White, eds., *Devotions and Desires* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 90-112.

Discussion Leader(s): _____

Week 5. October 4, 2023

Deesha Philyaw, *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies*

Tamura Lomax, "Theorizing the Distance Between Erotophobia, Hyper-Moralism, and Eroticism: Toward a Black Feminist Theology of Pleasure." *Black Theology: an International Journal* 16 (3): 263-79.

Discussion Leader(s): _____

Week 6. October 11, 2023

Stephan Pennington, "Willmer Broadnax, Midcentury Gospel, and Black Trans/Masculinities." *Women & Music* 22 (1): 117–25.

Gladys Bentley, "I am a Woman Again," *Ebony*, August 1952, <https://queermusicheritage.com/bentley6.html>

Hazel Newlevant, *If This Be Sin* (comic, 16 pp.)

James F. Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 154-191.

Saidiya Hartman, "Mistah Beauty, the Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Woman" in *Wayward Lives*

Recommended: C. Riley Snorton, "A Nightmarish Silhouette" in *Black on Both Sides*, p. 139-175.

Discussion Leader(s): _____

Week 7. October 18, 2023

Charles White, *The Life and Times of Little Richard* (UK: Omnibus Press, 2003), p. x-33, 55-79, 183-214.

Marybeth Hamilton, "Sexual Politics and African-American Music; or, Placing Little Richard in History," *History Workshop Journal* 46, no. 1 (October 1, 1998): 161–76.

Tyina Steptoe, "Big Mama Thornton, Little Richard, and the Queer Roots of Rock n' Roll." *American Quarterly* 70 (1): 55–77.

Ashon Crawley, "He Was An Architect: Little Richard and blackqueer grief," *NPR*, December 20, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/22/948963753/little-richard-black-queer-grief-he-was-an-architect>

Discussion Leader(s): _____

Week 8. October 25, 2023

Daniel Black, *Black on Black: On Our Resilience and Survival in America*

Class visit w/ Dr. Daniel Black, Professor of African American Studies, Clark Atlanta University

Discussion Leader(s): _____

Week 9. November 1, 2023

Doreen M. Drury, "Boy-Girl, Imp, Priest: Pauli Murray and the Limits of Identity." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 29 (1): 142–47.

Simon D. Elin Fisher, "Pauli Murray's Peter Panic." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3 (1-2): 95–103.

Rosalind Rosenberg, "Part III: Naming Jane Crow," in *Jane Crow: The Life of Pauli Murray*, p. 115-163.

Devon W Carbado and Donald Weise, *Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*. 1st ed. (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003), 297-298, 316-318, 331-364.

Visit to Schlesinger Library to view the Pauli Murray Papers, 3:15pm.

Week 10. November 8, 2023

E. Patrick Johnson, "Church sissies" in *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*, p. 182-255.

James Tinney, "Why a Black Gay Church?" in *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*

Brandon Thomas Crowley, *Queering Black Churches* (chapter draft forthcoming)

Class visit w/ Rev. Dr. Brandon Thomas Crowley, Senior Pastor of Myrtle Baptist Church, Newton, MA.

Discussion Leader(s): _____

Week 11. November 15, 2023

Eziaku Nwokocha, *Vodou En Vogue: Fashioning Black Divinities in Haiti and the United States*

Discussion Leader(s): _____

Week 12. November 22, 2023

No class. Thanksgiving Break.

Week 13. November 28, 2023

Alisha Lola Jones, *Flaming?* p. 1-69; 149-171; 198-217.

Discussion Leader(s): _____

Week 14. December 5, 2023

Monique Moultrie, *Hidden Histories: Faith and Black Lesbian Leadership*

Discussion Leader(s): _____