

WESTERN UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND WOMEN'S STUDIES

BLST3420F / ENG3891F: Black Intellectual Traditions

Fall 2026

Preliminary outline - subject to change

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The department would like to recognize that we are located on the traditional land of the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Lenape and Attawandaron peoples.

Course Description:

"[O]ur ancestors did not wade through rivers of blood so that we might surrender the interpretation of their lives in the hands of others. "

*-Vincent Harding, *The Vocation of the Black Scholar and the Struggles of the Black Community*, 1974*

This course asks a foundational question: who is a Black intellectual, and who decides? We begin by examining the idea of the Black intellectual itself — the questions of authority, credibility, and voice that shape whose knowledge counts as legitimate. From there, we trace how Black thinkers across the twentieth century theorized freedom, nationhood, and self-determination: from Du Bois's double consciousness and its later revisions, to the "freedom dreams" of Black radical movements, to the internationalist struggles for independence that linked Black liberation to a broader remaking of the global order. Throughout, we pay close attention to who gets included in these traditions and on what terms.

The course's second half turns to the forms Black intellectuals have used to think and organize: autobiography and other writings from inside prison walls; letters exchanged across distance and surveillance; poetry and visual art mobilized as weapons of the Black Arts Movement; film as a tool of political resistance; and speculative fiction which imagines futures beyond the world as it currently exists. Each form raises its own version of the course's central question: who has the right to narrate Black life, in what medium, and toward what end?

By the end of the course, students will understand Black intellectual traditions not as a fixed canon, but as an ongoing, contested practice carried out in scholarship, and just as often in prison cells, in letters, in verse, on film, and in visions of the future.

Course Outcomes:

- develop a critical understanding of Black intellectual traditions as they relate to questions of race, gender, sexuality, and empire

- acquire a thorough understanding of how Black feminist, queer, and radical thinkers challenge dominant conceptions of power, resistance, and liberation
- analyze the relationship between theory and practice
- become familiar with the political, historical, and cultural contexts in which Black writers, artists, and activists produce knowledge from the mid 20th century onwards
- investigate how forms of cultural production (e.g. literature, music, film, visual art) articulate visions of freedom, justice, and collective world-making
- assess the limitations and possibilities of intellectual and artistic production as forms of political resistance
- reflect on their own positionality in relation to the course themes, texts, and modes of expression

Learning Outcomes:

- skills in critical reading, writing, and analysis
- the ability to interpret and engage with a range of multimodal texts including visual, sonic, and literary forms
- oral communication and collaborative discussion skills
- research skills grounded in feminist and anti-colonial methodologies
- the ability to translate theoretical insights into creative, praxis-based assignments with public relevance
- a deeper understanding of how Black intellectual traditions inform contemporary movements for racial, gender, and sexual justice

Pre-Requisites:

GSWS 2230F/G or GSWS 2231F/G or permission of the department.

Required Texts:

Students are not required to purchase any texts for this course. All readings will be available on Western's Course Readings platform.

Evaluation:

- **Participation: 10%** - This course is rooted in collaborative learning. You're expected to come prepared, having completed the readings, and to participate actively in both full-class and small-group discussions. Thoughtful listening, building on others' points, and small-group contributions all count.
- **Reflection Response Portfolio (5 of 7 prompts): 20%** – Over the course of the term, 7 reading response prompts will be distributed in-class. You are required to complete 5 of them. Prompts will vary in type: some will ask for close reading of a specific passage, others for a connection between a thinker and a current event, others for a comparison across two texts, and some will respond to guest speakers or films. Each entry should be 200–250 words.
- **Analytical Essay (1000-1200 words): 25%** This essay should identify the specific point of inquiry you intend to carry into your Final Praxis Project. Think of it as the theoretical

groundwork for that later assignment. A brief note (1–2 sentences) at the end of the essay should state how this analysis will inform your Praxis Project topic.

- **In-Class Group Presentation: 15%** In groups of 2, you will trace the intellectual genealogy of a single figure, text, or concept from the course, showing how it draws on, responds to, or is challenged by other material we've read. Presentations should be 1 minutes, followed by discussion. Groups will sign up for a topic. Grades are assessed both on group delivery and individual contribution.
- **Final Praxis Project- “What Black Intellectual Traditions Can Teach Us About [X]”: 30%**

It asks you to bring the course’s central question (what is the relationship between Black intellectual and political thought and practice?) to a specific point of inquiry in a way that teaches someone that has not taken this class. Options include a zine, an open letter, or another proposed format that is NOT a traditional essay. Whatever format chosen should contain ~2000 words.

Course Website:

All course information, including assignments, will be posted on the course website. Go to <https://owl.uwo.ca/portal>.