

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 offers a survey of the central debates and intellectual movements that have shaped the field of Black Studies. For generations, Black writers, artists, activists, and political prisoners have grappled with some of the most urgent questions of modern life: What counts as (scientific or objective) knowledge and who decides? What does freedom actually mean and is it possible? What does and can it look like? Who has the right to tell the story of Black life and on whose terms? Tracing how Black thinkers across Canada, the US, Latin America, and the Caribbean have documented their own experiences, challenged dominant accounts of their histories, and organized toward different worlds, students will develop the analytical tools to understand not just what these thinkers argued, but what they were responding to, what they were refusing, and what they were trying to make possible. Through critical engagement with the Black radical tradition, we will examine how Black writers, artists, and activists have turned poetry, film, music, memoir, and political theory into tools for understanding, contesting, and reimagining political life.

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:

- **Attendance and 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.
- **Reflection Response Portfolio (5 of 7 prompts): 15%** – Over the course of the term, 7 reading response prompts will be distributed. You are required to complete 5 of them, submitted together as a portfolio at the end of term. 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.
- **Midterm Oral Exam: 25%**
- **Close Reading Analytical Essay (1500 words): 20%** This assignment supports the final Praxis Project).
- **Final Praxis Project- “What Black Intellectual Traditions Can Teach Us About [X]”: 30% (2000 words)**

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. Components include a brief proposal submitted half way through the class, a short annotated bibliography (which we will work on together in class), and the project itself.

Course Website:

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