

ENGL B372 Black Ecofeminism(s): Critical Approaches

T/Th 10:10 – 11:30 am

Instructor: Professor Alex Alston

Email: aalston@brynmawr.edu

Office Hours: Wednesdays 11:00 am - 1:00 pm

Course Description:

This course will guide students through an in-depth exploration of ecofeminism and what we might mean by a term/set of ideas and intellectual approaches such as “Black ecofeminism(s),” the plurality being important. Moving back and forth across history and spread out over the Atlantic geographies of Europe and the New World, the course tries to historicize and think capaciously about contemporary problems, such as the disproportionate role of overdeveloped Western countries in causing climate crises (the Anthropocene), the productive nature of climate disasters for capital, the scourge of industrial agriculture and food production, and ongoing regimes of racial capitalist violence (enclosure, accumulation, and extraction). The course is built on the idea that—and it tries to precisely pinpoint how--these processes are 1) unevenly or asymmetrically connected and 2) inextricably tethered to the exploitation of women (a category that the course deconstructs just as much as it relies on) and a range of other subject positions framed as non-normative by Western heteropatriarchal worlding, including the ecological world itself. To this end, the course texts will combine feminist materialisms (Marxist and new), Black Studies, Native Studies, the biological sciences, climatological discourse, film, and music as we look to not only build but apply various theoretical lenses and reading practices that fall under the umbrella of (Black) ecofeminism.

Course Learning Goals:

1. Students will leave the course with a long, long list of key terms from these intellectual projects.
2. Students will leave the course with a working understanding of the following frameworks a) Ecological feminism b) Black feminist Ecological Thought c) Marxist feminism, and 4) gender-facing histories of enslavement and colonialism, including their afterlives as they concern the social and ecological worlds (which are, we will repeat, never separate).
3. Students will leave the course with an ability to deploy these frameworks as they intervene on and critique hegemonic capitalist and patriarchal values, logic, ways of framing the world, and modes of being in it.

Course Questions:

- 1) What is ecofeminism? What is ecocriticism? How are they different and/or related?
- 2) How could/can ecofeminism be Black? What does that mean? What’s the relationship between ecofeminism and contemporary/historical practices of Black feminism or Black feminist theory?
- 3) Who would be some of the main contributors to a Black ecofeminist intellectual genealogy and what are the core interventions of this tradition?
- 4) What are the different disciplines and methodologies used to explore ecofeminist problems, concerns, and questions? And how do the protocols and lines of inquiry of these different disciplines and methods shape how scholars formulate and approach problems/questions?
- 5) Where does the “global vs local” binary fall in any of this?

Attendance Policy:

Unexcused (2): Each student is allowed 2 non-consecutive, unexcused absences for the semester. For these two absences, you are welcome to communicate in advance, and I encourage it, but you do not have to. On the **third unexcused absence**, deductions from the **final course grade** will begin to accumulate at a rate of 1 point per absence.

Excused: Absences due to religious holidays, sporting or club events, and illness will all count as excused (**with the necessary documentation****). There is no limit to the amount of excused absences one may have, however, out of respect for the course and fairness to other students, **after the 4th absence of any kind** (and before the 5th) students **are required to meet with the instructor** in person or virtually. We will discuss a plan for make-up work and alternate assignments to compensate for the missed class time.

Course-Specific COVID Note: Students with cold and/or flu-like symptoms are strongly encouraged to take an excused absence by emailing the instructor **before** class. Students are welcome to wear masks and are strongly encouraged to do so if they are sniffing, sneezing, or coughing regularly. I will also wear a mask if needed. While perhaps inconvenient, as a community, we have a responsibility to keep one another safe.

BMC Covid Policy: As of May 1, 2024, and as per CDC guidelines, students and community members are no longer mandated to isolate for 5 days if they are COVID-19 positive. They must continue to wear a mask when around others for 10 days post a positive COVID-19 test. As with all infectious illnesses, we ask that community members avoid crowded public areas until fever-free for 24 hours (without the use of fever-reducing medication). While symptoms may last longer than fever, it is important to monitor symptoms for improvement. If symptoms do not improve or worsen, community members are urged to seek medical advice before returning to full activities.

Lateness:

Because lateness is disruptive to seminars, students who arrive more than 10 minutes after class is underway or depart more than 15 minutes before the class session has ended will be marked as late. Scheduling issues are not an excuse to be consistently late. Two late marks will count as one unexcused absence in calculating final course grade deductions.

Late Work Policy:

Life happens and sometimes submitting assignments on time is simply not possible. This is by no means the end of the world! Unless explicitly stated otherwise, I am generally flexible with extension requests made at least 48 hours before a given deadline. The earlier you reach out, the happier I'll be to grant your extension. Whatever happens, communication is our friend and helps me help you. For late work received without notice, there is a 3-point deduction per 24 hours that the assignment is late. So, for example, if a discussion post is due on Thursday at 2:00 pm but is turned in on Monday morning: there would be a 9-point deduction (Friday, Saturday, Sunday.)

Office Hours:

My office hours are from 11:00 am–1:00 pm on Wednesdays and are **for you** to drop by (unannounced or scheduled) and chat about how the course is going, talk more about the material, and/or ask any questions you might have. Don't feel like you have to have something prepared, some of the best thinking is done through informal conversations. When required to meet about

assignments, if you can't make this time, just send me an email and we'll work out a time that works for both of us, though this will be subject to my schedule.

Email:

Though not always possible, I do my best to respond to emails within 48 hours (usually less). If they are time-sensitive (deadlines, grades, presentations, etc.), I will usually respond within 24 hours. If you have not heard from me, assume there is a good reason. To be clear, negligence, lack of preparation, or general anxiety on the part of a student does not necessarily constitute a time-sensitive emergency for me. Please check your email frequently, as I will post/send course announcements there and to Moodle.

Bryn Mawr College Sex Discrimination and Sex-Based Harassment Policy:

Bryn Mawr/Haverford College is committed to fostering a safe and inclusive living and learning environment where all can feel secure and free from harassment. All forms of sex discrimination, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, stalking, domestic violence, and dating violence, are violations of Bryn Mawr/Haverford's policies, whether they occur on or off campus. Bryn Mawr/Haverford faculty are committed to helping to create a safe learning environment for all students and for the College community as a whole. If you have experienced any form of gender or sex-based discrimination, harassment, or violence, know that help and support are available. Staff members are trained to support students in navigating campus life, accessing health and counseling services, providing academic and housing accommodations, and more.

The College strongly encourages all students to report any incidents of sex discrimination and/or sex-based harassment. Please be aware that all Bryn Mawr/Haverford employees (other than those designated as confidential resources such as counselors, clergy, and healthcare providers) are required to report information about such discrimination and harassment to the Bi-College Title IX Coordinator.

Information about the College's Sex Discrimination and Sex-Based Harassment Policy, reporting options, and a list of campus and local resources can be found on the College's website: <https://www.brynmawr.edu/inside/policies-guidelines-handbooks/sex-discrimination>

Accessibility Policy:

Bryn Mawr College is committed to providing equal access to students with a documented disability. Students needing academic accommodations for a disability must first speak with Access Services. Students can email accessservices@brynmawr.edu to request an appointment to begin this confidential process. If eligible for accommodations as per Access Services, students should schedule an appointment with the professor as early in the semester as possible to share their verification form and make appropriate arrangements. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and require advance notice to implement. More information can be obtained at the Access Services website. (<http://www.brynmawr.edu/access-services/>)

Any student who has a disability-related need to record this class must first be found eligible to do so by Access Services and must share this eligibility with me, the instructor. Class members need to be aware that this class may be recorded.

Bryn Mawr College Honor Code:

The text of the honor code can be found here: <https://sga.blogs.brynmawr.edu/honor-board/honor-code/>

Course-Specific Academic Integrity Policy:

1. The submission of all assignments, written and otherwise, for this course will be taken as an explicit statement that said work is your own.
2. **You should not use LLM's or other AI programs (e.g., ChatGPT) in any capacity for this course.** Not even for summaries. Note that the material generated by these programs may be and is often inaccurate, incomplete, or far too vague to be of any significant use. Most of all, please beware that the use of AI will stifle your own independent creativity, intellectual confidence, and analytical skillset (the development of which is the entire point of this course).
3. **You may not submit any work (no matter how much it's revised) generated by an AI program as your own.**

These models are fundamentally built by and on plagiarism and the theft of intellectual property to enrich a few oligarchs while destroying the environment and public capacity for cultural memory (they literally destroy old books). This destruction is socialized, and the public must pay for it, while all profits are strictly private, threatening the savings and meager investments of working class people with a speculative bubble of historic proportions. If/when this bubble does burst, the tech-oligarchs will no doubt be bailed out with taxpayer money, while many ordinary people will be sent to the poorhouse (assuming they aren't already there). While it might seem innocent enough, at this point, to use AI for assignments is to make an alliance with the forces of capital who explicitly and at every turn announce their disdain for humanity, democracy, the environment, and the lives of people like you and I. It is to choose subjection for temporary convenience. We must collectively build an alternative cultural and personal calculus. We don't kneel.

My Teaching at a Glance:

I am a first-generation college graduate from rural North Carolina. I was a Black Studies major at Duke, after which I did an M.A. in Black Studies and a Ph.D. in English and Comparative Literature at Columbia. I've always loved books and reading, and I think reading certain books can change you, just a little. I am a vegetable farmer at heart and see the classroom as a space of cultivation. Learning, then, strikes me as something like a journey through the secret lives of plants (a Stevie Wonder album that we'll listen to often). I want you to do well in the course, but more importantly, I want you to understand the historical and material conditions and the philosophical interventions that we refer to when we say "ecofeminism." As with any course like this, these days, some people (many of whom have positions of power) would not want us to have this class and that's worth keeping in mind as we go through it.

Required Texts:

Slave Old Man, Patrick Chamoiseau (1997, translated 2018, Linda Coverdale)

Beasts of the Southern Wild (2012) is available through LITS at the following link:

https://tripod.brynmawr.edu/permalink/01TRI_INST/1jld0uu/alma991018917295304921

Assignments:

20 % **Class Presentation:** In pairs or individually (up to you), you will present the readings for one class session (presentation sign-up sheet will be distributed in class 2 or 3).

Presentations will consist of a 12-15 minute discussion of the text(s), led by you, the presenter(s), and the preparation of a handout with key quotes, terms, and questions from the reading for the rest of the class.

15 % **Discussion Posts & Comments:**

One Set Every 3 Weeks, starting Week 2 -- 4 Total, **Due by end of Week 13**, 250 word min.

10 % **Participation:** Attendance + Quality (not Frequency) of Contribution to Large & Small Group Discussions + Writing on In-Class Assignments + Quizzes

15% ***Event Write Ups (3)* Attendance at talks on 9/25, 10/30, and 11/13 are required to be in the course.**

20 % **Midterm Critical Response**

20 % **Final Exam**

Note: More detailed information about each assignment is/will be available on the course Moodle.

Course Schedule:

- The reading/assignment schedule is subject to tweaks and adjustments based on our discussions/interests.
- The schedule lists the readings you will be responsible for that day.
- "Optional" readings are just that, completely optional. You may discuss, ask questions about, and write about these for assignments but you will never be responsible or expected to have read them.
- All of the songs (marked "listening") should be listened to closely at least once before class. Feel free to take notes and base your contributions to the discussion on those notes. They can all be found on YouTube (for free).
- "In Class" denotes just that, we will take a look at these texts/films in class, so don't worry about them beforehand.
- This is subject to and will change. The updated version will always be on Moodle.

Part I: An Intellectual Genealogy: Key Terms, Concepts, & Conversations

Week 1

9/1 Course Introduction

In Class: [Brittanica entry on ecofeminism](#)

["Ecocriticism: An Essay,"](#) Nasrullah Mambrol, 2016

Listening: "Mercy Me (The Ecology)," *What's Going On*, Marvin Gaye, 1971

9/3 "The Legacy of Carolyn Merchant's *Death of Nature* (1980)," Karen J. Warren, *Organization and Environment*, 1998

The Scientific Revolution: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w70BkCggyI>

“Being Prey,” Val Plumwood, *Quadrant*, March, 1995

Week 2

9/8 The Combahee River Collective Statement, dated 1977, published in Zillah Eisenstein, *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, 1978

“A Theory of the Bottom: Black Ecofeminism as Politics,” Jennifer James, *Resilience*, 2022-23

9/10 “Black Feminist Ecological Thought: A Manifesto,” Chelsea M. Frazier, 2020

“St. Juju” by Rivers Solomon, 2019

“Threnody for a Brown Girl,” Countee Cullen, 1925

Week 3

9/15 Marisa Solomon, “Introducing the Elsewhere” from *The Elsewhere is Black: Ecological Violence and Improvised Life* (2025), pp. 1 -23

Listening: “Village Ghetto Land,” *Songs in the Key of Life*, Stevie Wonder, 1976

9/17 “A Critical Physical Geography of Urban Soil Contamination,” by Nathan McClintock *Geoforum* 65 (2015), 69-85.

Part II: History, Patriarchy, Accumulation & Enclosure: Early Ecologies of Capital

Week 4:

9/22 Maria Mies, “Colonization and Housewifeization,” pp.74-96, *Patriarchy & Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labor* (1986, 2014)

9/24 “Colonization and Housewifeization,” cont., pp.96-111,

Week 5:

9/29 Jennifer L. Morgan, Introduction, pp. 1-11, & “‘Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder:’ Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770,” pp.12-39, *Laboring Women: Gender, Reproduction, and New World Slavery* (2004)

10/1 “Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology,” cont., pp.34-49,

Week 6:

10/6 Silvia Federici, Introduction, pp. 11-17, & “The Great Witch-Hunt in Europe,” pp. 163-192, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004)

10/8 “The Great Witch-Hunt,” cont., pp.192-218

Part III: Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Soil, Water, Storm & Climate

Week 7:

10/20 “Climate and Colonialism,” M. Mahony & G. Endfield, *WIREs Clim Change*. 2018;9:e510.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.510>

Optional: Chapter 4, “The Weather,” from *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), Christina Sharpe

10/22 "Climate Coloniality and Settler Colonialism: Adaptation and Indigenous Futurities," *Political Geography*, 2024

In Class: Clips from *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (film)

https://tripod.brynmawr.edu/permalink/01TRI_INST/1jjd0uu/alma991019572334604921

Optional: "Decolonization is not a metaphor," Eve Tuck & K. Yang, *Decolonization, Indigeneity, and Society*, (2012)

Week 8

10/27 "Cotton Whiteness and Other Poisons," Brian Williams & Jayson Porter, *Environmental Humanities*, 2022

10/29 "Racial Capitalocene," François Verges, *Verso*, 2017

"George Washington Carver: A Plant Scientist's Perspective," Yoselin Benitez-Alfonso, *Current Biology*, 2022

"Novel and History, Plot and Plantation," Sylvia Wynter, *Savacou*, 1971

Week 9

11/3 "Black Ecology," Nathan Hare, *The Black Scholar*, 1970

"Black Ecologies; subaquatic life and the Jim Crow enclosure of the tidewater," J.T. Roane, *The Journal of Rural Studies*, 2022

11/5 Film: *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012)

[bell hooks](#), "No Love in the Wild," *NewBlackMan (in Exile) Blog*

"New" Materialism, Animal Life, & Ecocriticism: Is Everything Really Related?

Week 10

11/10 "'You Should Give Them Blacks to Eat:' Waging Inter-American Wars of Torture and Terror," Sara E. Johnson, *American Quarterly*, 2009

11/12 Patrick Chamoiseau, *Slave Old Man* (1997), xi-45,

Optional: "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights," Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, 1990

Week 11

11/17 *Slave Old Man*, cont., 46-91 (TBD)

11/19 *Slave Old Man*, cont., 94-118

Week 12

11/24 Monique Allewaert, "Swamp Sublime: Ecology and Resistance in the American Plantation Zone," *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics* (2013)

11/26 No Class

Week 13

12/1 “Pleasures of the Hunt / We Must Be Creatures: Toward an Ecofeminist Hunting Ethic,”
Cynthia Belmont, *Feminist Studies*, 2023

12/3 Open

Week 14

12/8 Open

12/10 Open

****Final Exam TBD****