

## **Pieces of Me: Performing Blackness, Gender and Sexuality Spring 2017**

Professor Tabitha Jamie Mary Chester

Class Blog: <http://piecesofmepperformingblackness.wordpress.com/>

### **Introduction:**

What is Blackness? What is too Black<sup>1</sup>? Who is not Black enough? How do performances and representations of Blackness in popular culture shape ideas of Blackness in the United States? How does power and privilege affect the performances and representations of Blackness we encounter? How do issues of race and culture complicate the staging of gender politics? In this course we will watch and read various performances in an effort to understand how Blackness, specifically in relation to gender and sexuality is represented in U.S. popular culture. This course juxtaposes theoretical readings, films, television shows, musical performances, plays, etc. that address portrayals of masculinity/femininity, gendered hierarchies and/or queer identity through a Black subject position.

### **Course Goals:**

The course will aim to deconstruct stereotypes of “Blackness” in the U.S and African diaspora. We will examine how Black people are portrayed and represented in history, literature and popular culture and challenge the notion of essential or authentic Blackness. In what ways are monolithic understandings of Blackness both challenged and reinforced in popular culture? What does it mean for Black performance to take place in/by non-Black bodies? How does ethnicity influence performances of Blackness? How do performances of “Blackness” affect public policy and the public’s perception of Black people? In what ways does compulsory heterosexuality affect performances of Black masculinity and femininity? In what ways can Blackness be an aesthetic? How is Blackness inherently queer? Throughout the course we will focus on current performance and identity theories and explore race, gender and sexuality as constructed categories. Students will be invited to look critically at a variety of performances to think in new ways about gender, sexuality and identity in the performance of Blackness. Students will chronicle their experience in the class through weekly critical and/or creative blog posts.

### **Course Objectives:**

By the end of the semester students should

- Communicate effectively for specific audiences, purposes, and contexts, especially for academic and non-academic contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> "I capitalize "Black" because "Blacks, Like Asians, Latinos, and other 'minorities,' constitute a specific cultural group and, as such require denotation as a proper noun. By the same token, I do not capitalize "white," which is not a proper noun, since whites do not constitute a specific cultural group. For the same reason I do not capitalize 'women of color'". – Kimberle Crenshaw

- Understand the complexity of texts — how texts hold multiple meanings and produce multiple effects depending on audience, context, and methodological approach or perspective.
  - Develop new ways to engage and critique their world.
  - Strengthen their ability to nuance performance of Blackness, gender & sexuality.
  - Understand and integrate new words and concepts into their vocabulary.
  - Increase their digital technology skills through video and WordPress blogging.
  - Learn how to curate and hosts film discussions for a diverse population.
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### **Course Requirements**

**Classroom Community:** I expect you to be *present in body and mind*. Participation in class discussion is crucial – thus, if you are physically present but not active in the class, your grade and the classroom community will be affected. This does not mean you must be talking at every turn. It does mean you are expected to be intellectually present, paying attention to whomever is speaking and actively involved in the progression of the class. Never miss class because your paper isn't ready; talk to me about it. *ALWAYS BRING THE TEXT WE ARE DISCUSSING TO CLASS. You will be asked to leave if you have not adequately prepared for class i.e.: read and attempted to understand the material (and have materials with you).* The first three absences will incur no penalty- (1) point from your final grade will be deducted for each additional absence. Excessive lateness will result in an unexcused absence.

By nature of the course, we will be discussing plays, performances and art that challenge conventions, question authority and cross boundaries. Be advised, I expect that we all will contribute to an atmosphere of respect. Aggressive, insensitive or judgmental behavior will not be tolerated. Should you, for any reason, feel disrespected please feel free to consult with me directly, or contact me anonymously.

**Course Materials:** All readings will be available through a shared Google Drive folder. It is the student's responsibility to access and read the material before class. Students should always bring the readings with them. Students should maintain a Netflix or Amazon Prime account to access performances. Performances not available via Amazon Prime, Netflix or another online source will be available to be viewed in the library and/or borrowed from the instructor. Movies that aren't available to be streamed will be denoted with an (\*) on the syllabus.

**Communication:** You must use your Denison email for this class. I will send emails via the Google Classroom regarding assignments and requirements. Please make the necessary forwarding arrangements to ensure you check/use your Denison email account. If there are problems with your Denison account, in that you are not receiving emails, or cannot post

properly to Google Classroom, you must resolve these issues. If you do not, your Attendance/Performance grade will be lowered. I can be contacted by email and telephone. Email is the most reliable way to reach me. Please keep all email correspondence professional and concise. I will respond to emails within 48 hours of receipt. **Before and/or after class is not the appropriate venue to approach the professor with questions concerning your grade, please make an appointment.**

**Appointments:** You are always welcome to drop in during my office hours, but if you can make an appointment via Google Calendar, it will make my availability more certain. I will also hold virtual office hours from time to time. I will always do my best to accommodate you.

### Evaluation

#### **10% Identity and Blackness:**

Students must write a paper on identity. The paper should articulate how the student defines themselves, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religious beliefs and political affiliation. The paper should discuss the student's relationship to Blackness and how they define "Blackness." The papers should be 3-4 pages. Students are encouraged to write in whatever format they feel comfortable with (i.e. narrative, poetry, prose, etc.).

#### **20% Weekly Blog Post:**

Students are expected to maintain a blog as a venue to reflect on the themes and performances we discuss in class. Blogs should be posted by Sunday at midnight. Students should not spend more than one hour composing the blog. The format of the blog will be decided by the students from two options. 1.) A critical reflection on a performance that is accessible online (audio or video) that draws on similar themes as the performance and texts we discussed during the selected unit. This can be done via a written (250-500 words) or video (2 min.) response 2.) A creative response to a performance discussed in class using a media of the student's choosing (audio/video/painting/drawing/sculpture/ collage/ poetry/ fiction/etc.)

Students must include a short description of their creative response and how it relates to the original performance or class discussions. From time to time the instructor may give the class a specific prompt for their blog post, the students may respond with a critical response or a creative response. While students should proof-read their blogs, the blogs are not intended for an academic audience. This is an opportunity for students to engage with the material in a personal and creative way. Student's blogs will be used to facilitate in-class discussions. Students are not required to make their blogs public, but they must grant the instructor and their classmate's access. We will use [www.wordpress.com](http://www.wordpress.com) as a blog host. **Please send your blog address by January 26<sup>th</sup>.** Each unit students will be required to respond at least 2 of their classmates' blogs by class time. I will grade and provide feedback on your first blog. At the end of the semester you will submit three of your best blogs to be assessed for the remainder of your grade. **Students' 1<sup>st</sup> blog post will be due on February 12<sup>th</sup> by midnight.**

### **15% Film Discussion:**

During the first week of class students will form groups of 3-4 students. Starting with Unit 2 and ending with Unit 3, students will be responsible for hosting a film discussion. Student's will meet with the professor and decide on a film. Students will be responsible for creating discussion questions for their audience. Each student should plan to attend two (2) film discussions during the semester, the one their group hosts and another of their choosing. Students who are not hosting will be responsible for a 2 page evaluation of the group's film discussion. Responses should include how well the group explored the concepts and themes in their unit. Further guidelines will be distributed at a later date.

### **5% Participation:**

You are expected to be engaged and participate in class. This includes (but is not limited to) participating in discussions, in-class activities, coming to class prepared and arriving on time. Students will be required to write a short response evaluating their class participation at the end of the semester.

### **15% Paper Assignment 1:**

Students will write a critical essay analyzing one performance from Unit 1. This essay should not summarize the performance but rather allow the student an opportunity to perform a close reading of the material. Students should analyze both the historical and contemporary impact of the performance. The paper should be 3-5 pages. **Papers must be submitted to Google Classroom.**

### **15% Paper Assignment 2:**

Students will write a comparative essay using two performances from the syllabus. Students should use the performance analyzed in Paper Assignment 1 to examine how it relates to the second performance. Students will look at how cultural, historical and contemporary implications shift in relation to the second text. The paper should be 5-7 pages. **Papers must be submitted to Google Classroom.**

### **20% Final Project**

Students will be given the opportunity to select a final project from several options. Project guidelines will be given later in the semester.

### **Writing Guidelines:**

All written assignments MUST be type and double-spaced All assignments will be graded on both content and writing style. PROOFREAD. Grammatical errors, spelling errors, typos, incorrect punctuation, and the like will be deducted from your total grade for a written assignment. Do not rely on spell-check. Written assignments should follow MLA style. See [http://www.denison.edu/library/research/citation\\_guides.html](http://www.denison.edu/library/research/citation_guides.html) All written assignments must be

uploaded to Google Classroom. Students must bring a copy of all submitted assignments to class.

## Course Schedule

### Unit 1- Black is, Black Ain't: Society's Investment in Blackness

**Monday, January 16: Introduction to Course**

**Wednesday, January 18**

**Read:**

- "The Pot is Brewing" by E. Patrick Johnson. *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*. 2003 1-16.

**Performance: *Black is...Black Ain't* (1994) via Denison Library Online**

**Monday, January 23: Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Observed NO CLASS**

### Unit 2- Stereotypes of Blackness

**Wednesday, January 25: Mammys & Tragic Mulattoes**

**Read:**

- "Cultural Images as Symbols of African American Womanhood" by K. Sue Jewell

**Performance: *Imitation of Life* (1959) via Amazon Instant Video**

**Monday, January 30: Picaninny, Jezebels & Sapphires**

**Read:**

- "Get Your Freak on: Sex, Babies and Images of Black Femininity" by Patricia Hill Collins

**Performance: *The Women of Brewster's Place* (1994) Episodes 2 & 3 via Amazon Instant Video**

**Wednesday, February 1: Black Women Stereotypes part 2**

**Read**

- "Death in Black and White: A Reading of Marc Forster's *Monster's Ball*" by Sharon P. Holland

**Performance: *Monster's Ball* (2002) via Amazon Instant Video**

**Monday, February 6:**

**Black Brute, Uncle Tom**

**Read:**

- "The Construction of Black Male Identity in Black Action Films of the Nineties" by Kenneth Chan

**Performance: *New Jack City* (1991) via Amazon Instant Video**

**Wednesday, February 8: Blackface**

**Read:**

- "'Business as Usual': Sex, Race, and Work in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*" by Victoria Piehowski

**Performance: *Bamboozled*\***

### Unit 3: Representation of Blackness in Television and Film

**Monday, February 13: Blaxploitation**

**Read:**

- “The trope of Blaxploitation in Critical response to *Sweetback*” by Jon Hartmann
- “Beyond the Black Macho: Queer Blaxploitation” by Joe Wlodarz

**Performance: *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*\* (1971)**

**Wednesday, February 15: The Black Family**

**Read:**

- “Clair Huxtable is Dead: On Slaying the Cosbys and Making Space for Liv, Analise, and Mary Jane” by crunktastic
- “*The Cosby Show*: The View from the Black Middle Class by Leslie B. Inniss and Joe R. Feagin

**Performance: *Good Times, The Cosby Show & The Fresh Prince of Bel-air***

**Monday, February 20: Reality Television**

**Read:**

- “Race, Pre-and Post-Flavor of Love” by Jennifer Pozner

**Performance: Two Episodes of a Reality Show from an approved list**

**Wednesday, February 22: Urban Life**

**Read:**

- “‘I am the American Dream’: Modern Urban Tragedy and the Borders of Fiction” by C.W. Marshall and Tiffany Potter

**Performance: *The Wire* via Amazon Instant Video (Episodes TBA)**

**Unit 4: Performing Queerness**

**Monday, February 27: Ball Culture**

**Read:**

- “‘Ain’t Nothing Like a Butch Queen’: The Gender System in Ballroom Culture” by Marlon Bailey

**Performance: *Paris is Burning, Leave it on the Floor* via Amazon Instant Video**

**Wednesday, March 1: Downlow Brothas**

**Read:**

- “Out” in the Club: The Down low, Hip-Hop, and the Architecture of Black Masculinity by Jeffery McCune
- Watch: *The DL Chronicles Episodes Boo & Robert* via YouTube

**Monday, March 6: Black Lesbians**

**Read:**

- “Chasing Fae: ‘The Watermelon Woman’ and Black Lesbian Possibility” by Laura L. Sullivan

**Performance: *The Watermelon Women* (1996) via Denison Library Online, *Pariah* (2011) via Netflix**

**Wednesday, March 8: Black Transmen**

**Read: TBA**

**Performance: *Still Black* via <http://www.stillblackfilm.org/>**

**Monday, March 20: Black Transwomen**

**Read: TBA**

**Performance: *Tangerine* via Netflix**

**Unit 5: Performing Religious Identity**

**Wednesday, March 22: Gender and Sexuality in the Black Church**

**Read:**

- Black Clergywomen and Sexual Discourse by Shayne Lee

**Performance: *Woman Thou Art Loosed* (2004) via Amazon Instant Video**

**Monday, March 27: Gender and Sexuality in the Black Church cont'**

**Read:**

- "Silence and Shame in the Black Church" by L. Lamar Wilson

**Performance: *Blackbird* (2015) via Netflix**

**Unit 6: Representations of Blackness in Music**

**Wednesday, March 29: The Blues Women**

**Read:**

- "When a Woman Loves a Man: Social Implications of Billie Holiday's Love Songs" by Angela Davis

**Performance: *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972) via YouTube**

**Monday, April 3: Rap music and hyper-masculinity**

**Read:**

- "Booty Call: Sex, Violence, and Images of Black Masculinity" by Patricia Hill Collins

**Performance: *CB4- The Movie* via Amazon Instant Video, *Get Rich or Die Trying* via Netflix**

**Wednesday, April 5: Video-Vixen**

**Read:**

- "Vixen Resistin': Redefining Black Womanhood in Hip-Hop Music Videos" by Murali Balaji

**Performance: *Video girl* via Netflix**

**Monday, April 10: Bounce music towards a Queer(er) Hip-Hop**

**Read:**

- "Zebra Katz, Mykki Blanco and the rise of queer rap" by Clare Considine
- "Post-Pomo Hip-Hop Homos: Hip-Hop Art, Gay Rappers, and Social Change" by D. Mark Wilson

**Performance: *Big Freedia- The Queen Diva* via YouTube**

**Unit 7: Performing Blackness in Non-Black Bodies**

**Wednesday, April 12: Rock and Roll**

**Read:**

- "African-American Music: Dynamics of Appropriation and Innovation" by Perry A. Hall



- Eating The Other: Desire and Resistance by bell hooks

**Performance: *Memphis* via Amazon Instant Video**

**Monday, April 17:**

**Read:**

- .“Introduction to Cultural Appropriation: A Framework for Analysis,”  
Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation by Ziff, Bruce & Rao,  
Pratima V

**Performance: *Malibu’s Most Wanted***

**Wednesday, April 19: Blackness in Non-White & Non-Black bodies**

**Read:**

- “We Real Cool?:On Hip-Hop, Asian-Americans, Black Folks, and  
Appropriation” by Kenyon Farrow

**Performance: *Fresh off the Boat***

**Unit 8: Post Black Afro Future**

**Monday, April 24:**

**Read:**

- “Keepin’ It Real Is a Prison” by Toure
- “What if Toure were white?” by Honoree Fanonne Jeffers

**Explore:** <http://radicalpresenceny.org/>

**Watch:** Left of Black

**Wednesday April 26:**

**Read:**

- “Kehinde Wiley: Splendid Bodies” by Derek Conrad Murray
- “On Art and Contamination: Performing Authenticity in Global Art  
Practices” by Soraya Murray & Performance: TBA

**Explore:** <http://radicalpresenceny.org/>

**Watch:** Kehinde and Andre Leon Tally at SCAD, Kehinde Wiley The World Stage

**Group Presentation #7**

**Monday, May 1:**

**TBA**

**Sunday, May 7: Final Project Due**

***PLEASE NOTE:***

*\* Additional readings may be added to this list. If so, they will be either on electronic reserve or on blackboard.*

Important Dates:

January 22 – **Black Identity Essay**

February 12- Blog #1 – Stereotypes of Blackness

February 18- **Paper Assignment #1**

February 26- Blog #2- Representation of Blackness in Television and Film

March 25- **Paper Assignment #2**

March 26- Blog #3- Performing Queerness

April 2- Blog #4- Performing Religious Identity

April 16- Blog #5- Representation of Blackness in Music

April 23- Blog #6- Performing Blackness in Non-Black Bodies

April 30- Blog #7- Post-Black Afro-Future

May 7- **Final Project**

## **Writing Center**

The Writing Center (Barney Fourth Floor, 587-5681) is available to assist you with your writing. Please contact them regarding your writing assignments if necessary.

## **Academic Integrity and Plagiarism:**

The students and faculty of Denison University and the Department of Art are committed to academic integrity and will not tolerate any violation of this principle. Academic honesty, the cornerstone of teaching and learning, lays the foundation for lifelong integrity. Academic dishonesty is, in most cases, intellectual theft. It includes, but is not limited to, providing or receiving assistance in a manner not authorized by the instructor in the creation of work to be submitted for evaluation. This standard applies to all work. Students must clearly cite any sources consulted— not only for quoted phrases but also for ideas and information that are not common knowledge. Neither ignorance nor carelessness is an acceptable defense in cases of plagiarism. It is the student's responsibility to follow the appropriate format for citations. As is indicated in Denison's Student Handbook, available through [mydenison.edu](http://mydenison.edu), instructors must refer every act of academic dishonesty to the Associate Provost, and violations may result in failure in the course, suspension, or expulsion. For further information about the Code of Academic Integrity, see <http://www.denison.edu/about/integrity.html>

## **Academic Accommodations**

Any student requiring special consideration because of any type of disability must inform me as soon as possible within the first week of the course to discuss her or his specific needs. I rely on the Academic Support & Enrichment Center to verify the need for reasonable accommodations based on documentation on file in that office