

SYLVIA WYNTER, BLACK LIVES, AND STRUGGLE FOR THE HUMAN
(Revised in the wake of COVID-19 and shift to remote education**)**

Instructor: Dr. Neil Roberts
Williams College
Wed, 2:00-3:15 PM (synchronous portion)
Neil.Roberts@williams.edu
<http://sites.williams.edu/nr2>

Spring 2020
AFR 450/PSCI 372
Student hours: virtual post-break
& by appointment
Hollander Hall 213, x4772

Course description:

How do we judge the value of life? What is the significance of death and arbitrary threats to our existence? Why probe modern notions of black and blackness? What defines optimism, pessimism, enslavement, freedom, creativity, and being human? Do black lives matter? This capstone seminar will explore these and related questions through an examination of the life and work of Jamaican novelist, playwright, cultural critic, and philosopher Sylvia Wynter. Methodologically interdisciplinary, the course shall examine written and audiovisual texts that explore Wynter's inquiries into the central seminar queries. We will study figures and movements for black lives whose geopolitics frame the milieu of Wynter's work. Our examination of intellectuals and activists, with their explicit and implicit engagements with Wynter, shall facilitate assessing the possibilities, challenges, and visions of black living. We will also explore the current implications of Wynter's thought for Africana political theory, Afrofuturism, social justice, human rights, and critiques of liberal humanism. In the latter half of the course, students will have the opportunity to design, conduct, and present their own final research projects.

Required readings available for sale and on library reserve:

- Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (Monthly Review)
- Tehama Lopez Bunyasi and Candis Watts Smith, *Stay Woke: A People's Guide to Making All Black Lives Matter* (NYU)
- Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (W.W. Norton)
- Ibram X. Kendi, *How To Be an Antiracist* (One World)
- Patrisse Khan-Cullors and Asha Bandele, *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir* (St. Martin's Griffin)
- Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Duke)
- Katherine McKittrick, ed., *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Duke)
- Sylvia Wynter, *The Hills of Hebron* (Ian Randle)
- [GLOW] on syllabus = readings available in the files section of Glow.

Related texts available via library reserve/online:

- Anthony Bogues, ed., *After Man, Towards the Human: Critical Essays on Sylvia Wynter* (Ian Randle)
- Octavia Butler, Earthseed series: *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*
- David Cooper, ed., *The Dialectics of Liberation* (Verso)
- Edwidge Danticat, *The Art of Death: Writing the Final Story* (Graywold)
- Joseph Drexler-Dreis and Kristien Justaert, eds., *Beyond the Doctrine of Man: Decolonial Visions of the Human* (Fordham)
- W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (Free Press)
- Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Grove)
- Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Grove)
- Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Dub: Finding Ceremony* (Duke)
- Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Autonomedia)
- Paget Henry and Paul Buhle, eds., *C.L.R. James's Caribbean* (Duke)
- Aaron Kamugisha, *Beyond Coloniality: Citizenship and Freedom in the Caribbean Intellectual Tradition* (Indiana)
- Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (Reidel)
- Alondra Nelson, ed., special issue of *Social Text* on Afrofuturism
- Barbara Ransby, *Making All Black Lives Matter* (California)
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Heinemann)
- Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Duke)
- Frank Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (Liveright)

Course requirements:

Participants are expected to attend class regularly and complete the readings listed on the course syllabus. I will generally begin each class summarizing briefly the previous session's main points, and shall proceed to lecture for a portion of time about the current day's topic. As this is a seminar, you should be prepared to engage in full class discussion, close textual examination, and small group activities.

The following requirements serve as the basis for course evaluation **(UPDATED):**

- (1) Attendance **(20%)**
- (2) Participation **(30%)**: includes (a) one weekly reading e-post to Glow (*pre-break*), (b) contributions to class discourses (in-class & virtual), and (c) leading one virtual class discussion (*post-break*) with partner/s on the session's reading.
- (3) 7-page midterm essay **(20%)**
- (4) Final research project **(30%)**

{The seminar is now universal pass/fail as stipulated by the college.
Please note the evaluation requirements have been revised accordingly.**}**

Public Lectures and Guest Speakers

Throughout the spring semester there will be several public lectures, workshops, and conferences on campus connected to topics in our course as well as guest lecturers who will join us during seminar. Some of these events and speakers are listed on the syllabus. I shall announce additional guest lecturers and speakers after the semester begins.

Course policies:

No Laptops (PRE-BREAK):

Laptop computers—and by extension iPads and other electronic word processors—are *not* allowed during class time before the shift to remote education. Only students who require such e-devices for note taking purposes prior to spring break and who have written approval from the Dean's Office will be granted permission.

Attendance:

It is paramount for you to attend the sessions in order for all of us to best be able to discuss and decipher the course materials and lectures. Attendance will be taken each class period and you will be required to attend the entire class session to receive full credit. In case of sickness or other legitimate reason for absence, it is your responsibility to inform me in advance or as soon as possible after the class. Every absence after two instructor-excused absences will result in the reduction of your overall grade by a third of a letter grade (e.g. an A becomes an A-, a B+ becomes a B, etc.). To earn full attendance credit, you must come to class prepared to discuss the readings assigned for that session and with the necessary materials, required books, course packet, paper, and writing utensil.

Reading Responses (ONLY PRE-BREAK):

Each student is required to submit a single reading response to at least one reading per designated week on the course Glow site. This response is intended both to help prepare you for leading class discussion during the specified week and to process your opinions on the readings in relation to the feedback of your peers. ***All responses are due by 8:00am the morning of the class day (Wednesdays).*** Only responses posted by this time will count for the week's reading and participation. *Reading responses cannot be made up.* The response should be between *at least 275-300 words* and should analyze or evaluate the readings. I will monitor the discussion regularly, but not participate. In addition to answering the guidepost questions, feel free to use the online space to respond to comments posted by your peers. No reading responses are due in weeks that you submit the final version of a larger writing requirement.

How to Post reading responses and other asynchronous responses to Glow:

- 1) Go to <http://glow.williams.edu> and log in with your username and password.
- 2) Click on this course and then the specific Discussion Forum—within the Discussions section—listed by the Week for which you will be posting a response.
- 3) Click on the Reply icon and enter your response, making sure to include a Subject heading for your post at the top of the entry.
- 4) Click Post Reply to Forum.

Final Project:

The final project must be related to topics discussed in the seminar, and students are encouraged to compose a topic that emerges out of the earlier course essays. A 1-page proposal along with a detailed bibliography will be due in the second half of our class. You each shall meet with me individually (virtually) after spring break to discuss the project context and scope. You will have subsequently opportunities to consult with me in order to prepare for the project presentation and submission.

Library and Scholarly Resources during Remote Education:

See this site composed by the college library staff for the post-spring break period of remote education: <https://library.williams.edu/2020/03/31/library-services-for-spring-2020/>.

Sawyer library closed its physical collection after spring break as a result of COVID-19. This poses challenges for researchers. However, 50% of the library print collection is now available online through the new HathiTrust program.

Go to hathitrust.org and log in. Click on the yellow Log In button, find Williams College from the list of partners, and login with your Williams username and password.

Other research resources external to Williams include the Public Books Database: <https://www.publicbooks.org/public-books-database/>.

The database contains a listing of university presses offering free, open access usage to numerous books and journal article. I shall share additional resources via Glow.

Equipment Loan Guide:

Students (pre-spring break) are able to borrow technological equipment including video cameras, digital voice recorders, cables, mic stands, and related audio-visual items from Sawyer Library. To reserve materials, see: <https://libguides.williams.edu/EquipmentGuide>.

Workload

At Williams, we operate under the course unit system (rather than the credit hour system) as the metric required by many employers, granting organizations, graduate schools, and federal

agencies. In addition to the 3 hours we spend together during our weekly class meeting time, you should expect to spend on average at least 10 hours per week on the academic and creative work related to class. If you find that you are spending considerably more (or considerably less) time to engage with this course academically, please contact me so that we can determine the best course of action as you approach the materials. Should you have any additional questions about the relationship of course units to credit hours, consult the Office of the Registrar, which explains our course unit equivalency in greater detail.

Disability and Health Resources (UPDATED):

Students with disabilities of any kind who may need accommodations for this course are encouraged to contact Dr. GL Wallace (Director of Accessible Education) at x4672. See also the Office of Accessible Education online resource: <https://academic-resources.williams.edu/disabilities/>.

Students experiencing mental or physical health challenges that are significantly affecting their academic work or well-being are encouraged to contact me and to speak with a dean. The deans can be reached at x4171.

Furthermore, “Talkspace” is an online platform that has partnered with Williams recently in the period of remote education. Talkspace matches students with licensed mental health professionals. Students may use a Williams email address to register for services: <https://redemption.talkspace.com/redemption/williams-college>.

Inclusivity and Classroom Culture:

The Williams community embraces diversity of age, background, beliefs, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, gender expression, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, and other visible and nonvisible categories. I welcome all students in this seminar and expect that all students contribute to a respectful, welcoming, and inclusive environment. If you feel that you are not being welcomed, included, or accepted in this course, please come to speak me or a college administrator to share your concerns.

Honor Code:

As an institution fundamentally concerned with the free exchange of ideas, Williams College has always depended on the academic integrity of each of its members. In the spirit of this free exchange, the students and faculty of Williams recognize the necessity and accept the responsibility for academic honesty. A student who enrolls at the College thereby agrees to respect and acknowledge the research and ideas of others in his or her work and to abide by those regulations governing work stipulated by the instructor. Any student who breaks these regulations, misrepresents his or her own work, or collaborates in the misrepresentation of another’s work has committed a serious violation of this agreement.

With regards to the nature of collaborative work, students can exchange broad ideas or general approaches toward problem sets with other students, but may not engage in any joint writing

or step-by-step problem solving. One way to be sure you are not violating the honor code is to refrain from writing/typing/crafting your response to the assignment with others. Rather, save the writing until you are on your own and working independently.

A full statement of the Honor Code is available at: <http://sites.williams.edu/honor-system/>. If you have any questions about how the honor code applies to your work, I am happy to discuss those queries with you.

Schedule of readings by week:

Week 1: February 5

Organizational meeting: course overview

Week 2: February 12

Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (entire)

David Scott, “The Re-Enchantment of Humanism” (interview with Wynter)

Sylvia Wynter, “Sambos and Minstrels”

Recommended: Just Mercy film at Images Cinema, 2/14-2/20

Week 3: February 19

Wynter, “1492: A New World View”

W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Conservation of Races”

W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (selection)

Elsa Goveia, “The Social Framework”

Richard Pithouse, “Being Human after 1492”

Recommended: Wynter, “The Pope Must Have Been Drunk, the King of Castile a Madman”

Week 4: February 26

- **2/26, Guest lecturer: Nikole Hannah-Jones (journalist & 1619 Project creator)**
- **2/26, 7:00pm: public event at the '62 Center with Nikole Hannah-Jones, *Reflections on 1619 and the 400 Years that Built a Nation.***
- **2/27, 7:30pm: on Avery Sharpe’s *400: An African American Musical Portrait.***

Wynter, *The Hills of Hebron* (entire)

1619 Project, New York Times Magazine special issue

*Recommended: W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*; Wynter, *Black Metamorphosis*; Wynter, “Jonkonnu in Jamaica”; Wynter, *Maskarade**

Week 5: March 4

- **3/4, 7:00pm: public conversation with Teju Cole, Ishion Hutchinson & Rowan Ricardo Phillips, *Silent Poems, Talking Pictures, and the Infinite Playlist.***

Wynter, “The Ceremony Must Be Found”

Wynter, “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of Désêtre”

Recommended: Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*; Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*; Wynter, “Black Aesthetic” [CP]; Essays in *Black Studies in the University*

EXTENDED SPRING BREAK MARCH 14-APRIL 5 (NO CLASSES)

MIDTERM PAPER: due by the end of break, e-copy only.

Shift to remote education beginning the week of April 8th.

Week 6: March 11 & April 8 (NB: COVID-19 news interrupted our original session)

- **3/10 Saidiya Hartman talk postponed and *no Glow reading posts henceforth.***
- **Google docs file: sign up for week to lead a class discussion on Glow with peers.**

Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (entire)

Wynter, “Beyond Liberal and Marxist Leninist Feminisms” [Glow]

Recommended: Saidiya Hartman, “The Plot of Her Undoing” [Glow];
Wynter, “Beyond Miranda’s Meanings” [Glow]

Week 7: April 15

- **Monday 4/13: email final project proposal & arrange virtual meeting to discuss.**
- **This week: beginning of virtual Glow student group lead class discussions.**

Wynter, “We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk about a Little Culture” [Glow]

Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom” [Glow]

Chelsey Carter and Ezelle Sanford III, “The Myth of Black Immunity” [Glow]

Week 8: April 22

- **Continued: Glow student group lead class discussion on assignment material.**

Patrisse Khan-Cullors and Asha Bandele, *When They Call You a Terrorist* (entire)

Deva Woodly, “Black Lives Matter and the Democratic Necessity of Social Movements” [Glow]

Recommended: Martin Heidegger, “The Letter on Humanism”; Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia*; Wynter, “Human Being as Noun? Or *Being Human* as Praxis?”

Week 9: April 29

- **4/29, Guest lecturer via Zoom: Candis Watts Smith, co-author of *Stay Work***
- **Continued: Glow student group lead class discussion on assignment material.**
- **Work on final projects.**

Tehama Lopez Bunyasi and Candis Watts Smith, *Stay Woke* (selection TBA)
Wynter, “No Humans Involved” [Glow]

Recommended: Kevin Ochieng Okoth, “The Flatness of Blackness” [CP];
Jared Sexton, “Affirmation in the Dark” [CP]

Week 10: May 6

- **Last week with Glow student group lead class discussion on assignment material.**
- **Continue to work on final projects.**

Ibram X. Kendi, *How To Be an Antiracist* (entire)
Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals*: preface; intro.; chs. 1, 5

Recommended: Paget Henry, “Africana Studies as an Interdisciplinary Discipline” [Glow]

Week 11: May 13 (final class)

Virtual class presentations & course summation.

****Final project materials due by Friday May 15.****