Dangerous Womxn: Reformers, Radicals & Revolutionaries in 20th Century USA

Womxn & Literature

ENGL 247 Professor Robin Gayle

Spring 2026

Dangerous Womxn: Reformers, Radicals & Revolutionaries in 20th Century USA

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In the 1920s, the Daughters of the American Revolution & the Reserve Officer's Training Corps dubbed Chicago social reformer and activist Jane Addams "the most dangerous woman in America," and the FBI maintained a dossier on her. Throughout the 20th century, radical womxn in the US have been depicted as "dangerous," and oftentimes, they have been actively persecuted by the US government. During this course, we will examine the lives of femxle reformers, radicals, & revolutionaries, and we will explore how the FBI's Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPro) illegally suppressed these "threats."

During the course, we will tour Jane Addam's Hull House & the Latinx Cultural Center's indoor mural, which includes an autographed depiction of Puerto Rican activist Lolita Lebron's arrest. Other dangerous womxn we will study include Zora Neale Hurston, Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, Maya Angelou, Assata Shakur, Anna Mae Aquash, Judith Heumann, Sandra Cisneros, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and others

Note: This course does not assume any prior knowledge or experience with feminism, queer theory, and/or the application of these theories to literature.

LEARNING GOALS

1. Examine how womxnist writing challenged societal norms
2. Discover an appreciation of womxn's literature by reading a wide array of womxnist literature written during or about the 20th century
3. Consider the historical and social context of womxn's writing.
4. Conceptualize "Other" and the intersection of identities.
5. Identify the unifying discourse within womxn's writing among a variety of cultural and experiential backgrounds.

Integration with Hull-House Materials

(Content adapted from original course syllabus by Hull-House educators to reflect how materials were used for in-class instruction and assignments)

TOPIC 1: JANE ADDAMS & THE HULL HOUSE

Prior to class, students will read and annotate Jane Addams' essay "The Devil Baby." Instruction will familiarize students with the work of Addams and Hull-House.

READINGS

- "The Devil Baby" (1916)

TOPIC 2: BLACK WOMXN SHARING DANGEROUS TRUTHS

Prior to class, students will read and annotate Ida B. Wells' article "Lynching and the Excuse for It." Instruction will facilitate conversation between the piece and others written by Black womxn activists.

READINGS

- "Lynching and the Excuse for It" (Wells, 1901)

CLASS PROJECTS

In addition to participation and a midterm exam, students' grades will cinsist of three types of projects over the course of the semester that could integrate Hull-House sources, along with others from the class, into cohesive applications of their learning objectives.

These include think pieces to be completed at the start of class sessions in response to a prompt, a close reading essay, and a final womxnist artivism project.

THINK PIECES

You will complete daily in-class think pieces that will be kept in a journal. Prompts may include a relevant video or time to consider the intersections of your own interests with the readings of the day.

CLOSE READING

You will write a critical analysis of an excerpt of your choice from a class reading.

WOMXNIST ARTIVISM PROJECT

You will make an art piece to expose a womxnist issue & write an accompanying artist's statement that conceptually links your project to core class concepts/reading.

Sample Assignment

THINK PIECE

Your daily in-class think pieces will be kept in a journal.

Often, at the start of class, I will show a relevant video that you can conceptually link to your think piece. Other times, this writing time may enable you to consider how the reading intersects with your interests, politics, or beliefs. What would you like to learn more about? How else does this reading connect to course themes?

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