INSTRUCTOR’S MANUAL

to accompany

The Longman
Anthology of
Women’s Literature

Mary K. DeShazer
INTRODUCTION

This instructor’s manual for The Longman Anthology of Women’s Literature addresses a number of issues for teachers and students to consider:

• Why teach women’s literature as a distinct set of traditions?
• What relationship to the traditional literary canon, and to established genres and historical paradigms, does women’s literature have?
• What links exist between feminism and courses in women’s literature?
• What relationship does women’s literature have to women’s studies?
• Which works by women, which particular women, and what themes and theories should be emphasized in a women’s literature course?
• What do students need to know about women’s literary traditions in order to become accomplished academic writers and critical thinkers?
• How can students be encouraged to respond to women’s literature through their personal experience as well as through traditional academic discourse?
• How can teachers of women’s literature best help students to integrate the knowledge they glean from these classes into their academic and personal lives?

As editor of The Longman Anthology of Women’s Literature, I believe that there should not just be one established tradition of women’s literature—a “major writers” tradition that runs from Margery Kempe to Charlotte Brontë to Virginia Woolf to Adrienne Rich and focuses on the Anglo-American canon—but a number of shifting, contingent canons capable of expanding or contracting as new or forgotten works by women are recovered and re-evaluated. These canons have become more inclusive as scholars of women’s literature like myself, trained in the Anglo-American tradition, have educated our students and our selves about women’s writing from countries other than England and the United States. As a feminist critic I assume and celebrate links between women’s writing through the ages and feminist movements across cultures and throughout history, as well as connections with women’s studies as an interdisciplinary field of inquiry.

Because of these commitments, I have selected for inclusion here more than 140 authors writing in English from the Anglo-Saxon period to the present, women from Antigua, Australia, Canada, Croatia, Ghana, India, Ireland, Jamaica, New Zealand, Nigeria, Scotland, South Africa, and Trinidad-Tobago as well as England and the United States. The approach to U.S. literature is multicultural, and the anthology features writing by African-American, Native-American, Chinese-American, Japanese-American, Vietnamese-American, Jewish, Latina, and European-American women. Works by these writers represent the conventional genres of fiction, poetry, and drama along with less traditional ones such as letters, diaries, speeches, instruction manuals, and autobiographical and polemical essays. The selections encompass a broad range and include new offerings of literature prior to 1800 and an unusual number of global and multicultural writings. In addition, the anthology contains...
a number of full-length literary texts, including Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own, Austen’s Northanger Abbey, Rossetti’s Monna Innominata, Chopin’s The Awakening, Lorde’s Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power, and four plays: Behn’s The Lucky Chance, Churchill’s Vinegar Tom, Barnes’s To the Dogs, and Glaspell’s Trifles.

This anthology also offers important works of feminist theory and criticism that can illuminate writing by women. Critical theory has transformed the ways in which literary studies are conducted, and feminist theory has made major contributions to this body of knowledge. I believe it is important to expose students to significant works of feminist theory in order to enhance their understanding of the academic field of women’s literature, and to provide them with critical tools for analyzing and writing about literary texts. Giving students direct exposure to theoretical texts allows them to hear what theorists say in their own voices, rather than having to deduce an understanding from someone else’s description. This exposure helps them become aware that the careful, vivid use of language is as important in the writing of theory and criticism as it is in literature. Reading theory also helps students understand the historical development of feminism and make crucial links between theory and other forms of feminism such as grass-roots action. Moreover, an exposure to feminist criticism and theory helps skeptical students understand that this is serious scholarship; it is not just “male-bashing,” nor does it merely laud women’s achievements. It is scholarship that questions women’s production and access to creative outlets, such as literature, on a number of different levels. Finally, critical essays provide students with models of excellent analytical writing, showing, not just telling them what is involved in literary criticism.

In addition to a broad selection of women’s literature and feminist theory, this anthology offers a number of special features, including

- a thematic and theoretical method of organization rather than a strictly historical approach;
- sectional introductions that explore each conceptual theme, followed by an annotated bibliography and suggestions for further reading;
- intertextualities, or “case studies,” at the end of each section that promote discussion, facilitate critical writing, and link selected texts;
- historical appendices that introduce students to the six time periods represented by the literary selections offered herein;
- biographical headnotes and bibliographies of critical works about each author included in the anthology.

These features are designed to make The Longman Anthology of Women’s Literature a comprehensive and flexible textbook for use in a wide variety of women’s literature and women’s studies courses and by professors who adopt diverse pedagogical styles.
An Overview of the Conceptual Themes

Rather than the conventional historical method of organization, The Longman Anthology of Women's Literature offers five provocative thematic and theoretical categories of entries. The first of these, “Engendering Language, Silence, and Voice,” addresses the issue of what it means for a woman to be so bold as to write in a man’s literary world. How does she find her own voice—her puzzled, tentative, inspired, or ebullient self—when she takes up the pen or sits before the computer? Section I begins with two pivotal works of feminist theory: Virginia Woolf's A Room of One’s Own and bell hooks’ “Talking Back”. The first sustained work of feminist criticism in English, A Room of One’s Own is central to any course focusing on women's writing. It explores the difficulties, psychological and material, that women writers have had to confront: economic obstacles, indifference or hostility of others, loss of creative identity, self-doubt, even suicide. This work also foregrounds the power of women who manage to break silence and find voice. The essay by hooks introduces race, as well as gender and class, to the topic of claiming the right to write; for it discusses the need to “talk back” to authority figures who would deny African American women their voices, and to claim more private and public space in which black women’s creativity can be enhanced. These works are useful for introducing students to feminist theory; they are intellectually engaging and accessible, although some readers will have initial difficulty with Woolf's stream-of-consciousness style. “Intertextualities” in the anthology and the “Study Questions” chapter of this manual offer topics for writing about and discussing A Room of One’s Own and “Talking Back” that should help students better comprehend these texts.

The second thematic and theoretical category, “Writing Bodies/Bodies Writing,” departs from the French feminist theorist and advocate of l’écriture feminine, Hélène Cixous. “Write your self,” she admonishes in “The Laugh of the Medusa”; “your body must be heard.” How women have written the geography of their body, claiming or responding ambivalently to its cycles, illnesses, strengths, and desires, is also the topic of the essay by U.S. critic Nancy Mairs, “Reading Houses, Writing Lives: The French Connection.” Whether present or absent, submerged or exuberantly visible, women’s bodies figure prominently in their creative endeavors. Since many students will find Cixous’s essay difficult even after you have introduced them to the concept of l’écriture feminine, I like to ask them to summarize in 1-2 pages what they see as her main beliefs about women’s writing. Writing a summary is not an easy task, but it promotes both critical thinking and close reading, encouraging students to dig deeply and familiarize themselves with the points a writer is presenting, the reasons and evidence she cites, and the conclusions she draws. Mairs’s essay is easier for students to understand because it is more personal; it refers often to the author’s experience with disability in making its argument. In addition, it draws upon Cixous’s theory in challenging mind/body dualism. Asking students to consider where Cixous’s and Mairs’s essays intersect and diverge can also be a useful exercise.
The third conceptual theme, “Rethinking the Maternal,” builds upon the theoretical concepts of literary critic Susan Rubin Suleiman and sociologist Patricia Hill Collins. In “Writing and Motherhood” Suleiman “puts psychoanalysis to rest” by challenging the assertion of psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch that “mothers don’t write; they are written.” What happens when women do write as mothers—“integration, connection, reaching out, a defense against drift and spiritual death, a way of outgrowing the solipsism of childhood”—is Suleiman’s subject. In “Shifting the Center” Collins challenges feminist theorists to consider race and class issues when examining the vexed terrain of “motherwork” and creativity, and examines the diverse ways that women of color have represented maternity in their writing. Students should find both essays accessible, especially those parts of the essays which provide analysis of texts that are included in Section III; Suleiman offers a fascinating reading of Rosellen Brown’s “Good Housekeeping,” while Collins analyzes Beth Brant’s “A Long Story.” Asking students to point out strengths and shortcomings of the critics’ interpretations of these stories will give them an angle from which to approach the theory. Some students will need a brief introduction to psychoanalytic approaches to literature; you might wish to consult Elizabeth Wright’s Psychoanalytic Criticism: Theory in Practice (Methuen, 1984) for such an introduction.

The fourth thematic category, “Identity and Difference,” uses two feminist theoretical concepts as points of departure for examining women’s writing. In “If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire,” Michelle Cliff grapples with issues of identity, otherness, and postcolonialism by investigating her experiences as a diasporic Jamaican woman. “To raise the question of identity is to reopen the discussion on the self/other relationship in its enactment of power relations,” claims Trinh T. Minh-ha, whose essay “Not You/Like You” follows Cliff’s. These works of theory can be difficult for undergraduates, and having students summarize each writer’s argument about identity and difference will help them make sense of this material. In the “Using Intertextualities” chapter of this manual I suggest other ways of approaching this material.

The fifth conceptual theme, “Resistance and Transformation,” moves women’s literature overtly into the political sphere by way of cultural and feminist studies. Resistance literature, as Barbara Harlow explains, “actively engages in the historical process of struggle against cultural oppression.” Adrienne Rich’s pivotal essay “Notes Toward a Politics of Location” introduces this section and invites students to interrogate their own positions as readers of polemical texts by women. Ellen Kuzwayo’s “Nkosi Sikelel’i Africa (God Bless Africa)” offers a South African freedom fighter’s view of the struggles against apartheid that black women of her country have undertaken. I ask students to list and define in their own words the key theoretical concepts that Rich and Kuzwayo use, phrases like “politics of location,” “struggle for accountability,” “white circumscribing,” and “self-determination.” Building a critical vocabulary will give them tools for interpreting the poetry, fiction, and prose that women
writers have used to challenge the status quo and envision a future of peace, equality, and justice.

The anthology’s sectional introductions are designed to prepare students to analyze these themes and help them find a feminist context from which to approach the literary works. In addition, the “Intertextualities” feature at the end of each section of the anthology offers discussion questions designed to help students decipher the twenty theoretical and critical essays, explore parallels between them, and connect them to selected readings from the relevant section. For further consideration, I have included additional discussion questions on each of the theoretical texts and several representative writers in the “Study Questions” chapter of this manual. I have also included sample course syllabi for “Women Writers in Society,” “Women and the Sacred,” “Gender and Postcolonialism,” and “Ethnic Literature by U.S. Women,” along with commentary that explains how this anthology can be used to teach such courses.

The five conceptual themes by which the anthology is organized cut to the heart of women’s literature by addressing issues of enduring importance to women as subjects and as readers. However, the anthology lends itself nicely to other thematic approaches as well, and, to facilitate teachers who wish to explore other topics, I have provided five other thematic tables of contents in the text itself: Women and the Sacred, Coming of Age, Women and Aging, Gender and Postcolonialism, and American Ethnic Literatures. In this manual I have included three additional thematic tables of contents: Family Dynamics, Education and Work, and Love and Marriage. In addition, I have included a sample syllabus for an interdisciplinary course, Introduction to Women’s Studies, which uses The Longman Anthology of Women’s Literature as a core text.

**How to Use the Historical Appendices**

The goals of the historical appendices are to define each literary era clearly and concisely, and to foreground the role of women writers in that era. By considering a prevailing literary ethos and literary women’s place in it, students can find a helpful entrée into a vast historical and literary culture. For these reasons I have written these appendices with a student audience in mind. The appendices will be most crucial for teachers who prefer to offer a historically-based or chronological approach to women’s literature rather than a thematic one, and for teachers of historically specific courses such as “Medieval Women Writers” or “British Women Writers Before 1800.” However, teachers of thematic courses will also find that the appendices provide valuable background information for their students. Whether English majors or not, many students of women’s literature can benefit from reviewing the major literary concerns of the historical period they are studying before or during their reading of the assigned texts.

I have used six standard literary historical periods as my framework: Old English and Middle English Literature, 449–1485; Renaissance and Early
Seventeenth-Century Literature, 1485–1650; Late Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century Literature, 1650–1800; Nineteenth-Century Literature, 1800–1900; Modernist Literature, 1900–1945; and Contemporary Literature, 1945–2000. Due to spatial considerations the essay on each period can provide only a brief overview of a complex body of historical data and literary movements.

In addition to their value as required or supplementary reading to help students understand the contexts in which women have written, the appendices can aid students in their research projects. In “Using the Sectional Introductions and Annotated Bibliographies” and “Using Intertextualities” I frequently suggest ways that students might profit from reading the appendices before undertaking critical writing or historically based research. For example, reading the Renaissance appendix prior to seeking information on Rachel Speght’s polemic, “A Muzzle for Melastomas,” will further acquaint students with the history of the querelles des femmes and Speght’s role in this controversy; it will also direct them to helpful scholarly sources on the topic.

The anthology’s website includes a number of links that will take students to internet sources where cutting-edge historical scholarship, debates, and bibliographies can be found—sites for such initiatives as the Early Women Writers Project of Brown University. Please check out this website and have your students do so.

How This Manual is Organized

The instructor’s manual is divided into six chapters:
chapter one: -Using the Sectional Introductions and Annotated Bibliographies
chapter two: Using “Intertextualities”
chapter three: Study Questions on Focal Writers and Theorists
chapter four: Strategies for Developing a Feminist Classroom
chapter five: Strategies for Teaching Difficult Material
chapter six: Course Syllabi and Commentary

I have conceived of this instructor’s manual as an idea bank, an offering of discussion techniques, study and journal questions, teaching strategies, and course syllabi that have worked well for me as a professor of women’s literature and women’s studies. I hope that you will find this manual and the anthology’s website illuminating as you prepare your own courses!
CHAPTER ONE

USING THE SECTIONAL INTRODUCTIONS AND ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHIES

The five sectional introductions in The Longman Anthology of Women’s Literature and the annotated bibliographies that accompany each introduction provide students with useful support in contextualizing the literature they will read. Specifically, the introductions help students by explaining the focal theme, describing the literary works included in that section, providing access to key issues in feminist criticism, and focusing analysis toward engaged and original interpretations of literature. The introductions and the bibliographies can be used in a variety of ways, depending upon the nature and design of your course and your preferred pedagogical strategies. When I teach a survey course on women and literature, I usually choose two or three of the five conceptual themes to foreground, and I assign students the sectional introductions at the beginning of the appropriate class unit. The advantages of this method are that students will glean both theoretical knowledge of the focal theme and an overview of the works included in that section of the anthology, and they will thus be well prepared for the selections you choose to teach. One potential drawback to this method, of course, is that the students’ ideas about, say, writing the body will be overly influenced by my presentation of it, and they might view the critics I cite as the final authorities on this topic. If you prefer to have students bring their own knowledge to bear on a thematic unit without such an introduction, or if you prefer to introduce literary texts before theoretical ones, the sectional introductions can function as conclusions to reinforce and expand the students’ understanding of texts and concepts you have taught during the unit. This approach lets students encounter the thematic introductions just before encountering “Intertextualities”; thus the writers and issues discussed therein will be fresh in their minds as they grapple with the questions for journals and discussion.

The annotated bibliographies are intended not only as a brief overview of works cited in the sectional introductions, but also as a resource for student writing and research projects. For this reason each bibliography is divided into two sections, Works Cited and Suggestions for Further Reading. Most of the works that I annotate are scholarly books and collections of articles that relate closely to the focal theme and key theoretical issues of each section; occasionally I cite a helpful book or an article on a single author, usually a person featured in “Intertextualities.” I have included multicultural sources in each bibliography.

Teaching “Engendering Language, Silence, and Voice”

The introductory essay for Section I, “Engendering Language, Silence, and Voice,” discusses the term “engender,” introduces students to feminist literary
criticism and key terms such as “feminist” and “gynocriticism,” and examines in depth each member of the title’s triad: “language,” “silence,” and “voice.” You might ask students to consider these questions after they read the introduction:

1. How do the epigraphs from Woolf and hooks illuminate the theme of engendering language, silence, and voice? What questions do they raise about this topic that you would like to have answered in this part of the course?

2. How have feminist literary critics challenged the traditional assumption of the male writer’s voice as universal?

3. Of the literary works cited in this introduction, which examples stand out in your mind of women’s denigrating their own art or celebrating it? Why were you drawn to these particular passages?

4. Do you think an important challenge for women writers today is to break silence, embrace it, do neither, or do both? Explain your reasoning.

5. What particular obstacles do women of color face as writers, according to this introduction, and how have they resolved them in claiming their right to write?

1. Here are three writing projects that you can assign students after they study this section of the anthology, projects for which the annotated bibliography and the anthology web page can be resources:

1. Choose a writer from this section whom you view as resisting silence and one whom you view as embracing it, and use their writing as the basis from which to study the effects of silence on literary women, either contemporary or during a particular century. Consider the treatment of society-imposed silencing, meditative silence, angry silence, or joyful silence in these women’s works. You might find the historical appendices helpful in probing this issue, especially if you choose pre-twentieth century writers. One approach to this assignment is to contrast the writers whom Woolf discusses in Ch. 4 of A Room of One’s Own as having been plagued by silencing (Cavendish, Finch, Charlotte Brontë) with those Woolf claims were unperturbed by it (Austen, Emily Brontë). Another approach is to take a multicultural perspective and consider how women of color have represented silence, e.g. hooks, Yamamoto, Kingston, Anzaldúa, Walker, Mhlophe. Bibliographic material particularly relevant to the topic of silence includes works by Anzaldúa, Cixous and Clément, Ettin, Lockett, Olsen, Rich, and Trinh.

2. Choose your favorite literary selection from “Engendering Language, Silence, and Voice” and analyze the author’s voice and the voice(s) of her characters, narrators, and/or speakers. By “author’s voice” I mean the style in which she writes, her key themes, and the artistic strategies (e.g., use of personae, stream of consciousness or other narrative technique, image clusters) that recur in her work. To answer this part of the question you might want to read several other pieces by this writer aside from those that appear in this anthology; this will also provide a more full sense of her body of work. To analyze the voice of a character, narrator, or speaker, it is helpful to consider tone, language, diction, dialogue, rhetoric, and, of course,
subject matter. Useful bibliographic material includes works by Diáz-Diocaretz, hooks, Miller, Rich, DeShazer, and Gilbert and Gubar.

3. Choose one the following exercises after reading Austen’s Northanger Abbey: (a) analyze the novel to determine whether it contains the qualities of “incandescence” and “a woman’s sentence” that Woolf claimed on behalf of Austen (see A Room of One’s Own and the Austen and Woolf bibliographies for relevant criticism); (b) analyze the novel as a gothic saga by comparing a key passage from it to one of the following: Ann Radcliff’s The Mysteries of Udolpho (often cited by Catherine Moreland), Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” or any work by Mary Higgins Clark. See Ellen Moers’s Literary Women and Janice Radway’s Reading the Romance for critical insights.

Teaching “Writing Bodies/Bodies Writing”

The introductory essay for Section II, “Writing Bodies/Bodies Writing,” discusses the ambivalence many women feel toward their bodies, considers French and Anglo-American feminist theories regarding “writing the body,” and analyzes four approaches to the body and desire that women writers through the ages have inscribed: desire unfulfilled, bodies exploited, bodies celebrated, and desire transformed. You can ask students to reflect on these questions after reading the introduction:

1. How do the epigraphs from Cixous and Ostriker illuminate the theme of Writing Bodies/Bodies Writing? What questions do they raise about this topic that you would like to have answered in this part of the course?
2. How have women throughout history inscribed their sexual longing in poetic elegies? Of the poets cited here, which speaks most compellingly to you of love and loss, and why?
3. What two or three strategies that women have used to “speak the unspeakable” about sexual abuse do you find most effective, and why? Give examples to support your claims.
4. What connection, if any, do you find in women’s literature between celebrating the female body and writing explicitly about sexual experience? Explain your reasoning and give an example from the introduction.
5. What does it mean for a woman writer to “transform desire” in her work?

1. Here are three writing projects you can assign to students after they have read this introduction and discussed the literature from this section that you teach:

1. Analyze the similarities and differences in two women writers’ representations of sexual violence or abuse, choosing one writer from the eighteenth or nineteenth century and one from the twentieth century. What does your study indicate about the women’s treatment of this theme across historical time periods? Appropriate writers to consider include Manley, Jacobs, Lorde, and Olds. Helpful bibliographic material includes works by Brownmiller, Davis, Ostriker, Otten, Scarry, and Lashgari.
2. Explore the points of contact and divergence in a text in which a woman writes her body using a first-person voice and one in which the author uses an omniscient narrator. What have you learned about the theme of writing bodies and about voice and positionality from conducting this study? Appropriate writers include Cixous, Mairs, Kempe, Jacobs, Bambara, Brand. Relevant bibliographic sources include Cixous and Clément, DuPlessis, Marks and Courtivron, Benstock, Burns, and Suleiman.

3. Analyze Rossetti’s Monna Innominata as a feminist revision of the Petrarchan tradition in which male troubadours bemoan the loss of a distant lady. What happens when the lady offers the complaint? See the Rossetti bibliography, Meg Bogan’s The Women Troubadours, Mary DeShazer’s Inspiring Women, and the anthology web page for relevant critical perspectives.

**Teaching “Rethinking the Maternal”**

1. The introductory essay for Section III, “Rethinking the Maternal,” examines the anger, ambivalence, and affirmation with which women have written about motherhood, and considers ways in which works written from a mother’s perspective differ from those written from a daughter’s. In addition, it discusses essentialist views of mothers, special issues for racial-ethnic mothers, “motherhood as experience and institution,” and women’s redefinitions of the maternal. You might ask students to reflect upon the following questions after reading this introduction:

2. How do the epigraphs from Anzaldúa and Collins illuminate the theme of rethinking the maternal? What questions do they raise about this topic that you would like to have answered in this part of the course?

3. What perspectives on motherhood do Suleiman and Collins, the focal feminist theorists for this section, bring to the topic? What are their points of contact and divergence?

4. Why is it often difficult for writing mothers to express ambivalence toward their children or their maternity?

5. Of the writers cited in the “Writing as a Daughter” section of the introductory essay, which do you find most compelling in her inscription of the “deepest mutuality” between mothers and daughters and which in her inscription of the “most painful estrangement”? (Rich’s terms). Explain your choices.

6. “What is a mother? What is maternal?” asks the feminist theorist Marianne Hirsch in her book The Mother/Daughter Plot. After reading this introduction, how would you answer those questions?

Here are three writing projects that can emerge from this section of the anthology:

1. What concerns does women’s literature present racial-ethnic mothers as facing that European or Euro-American women do not face or experience differently? Use Collins’ essay as a basis for your response, as well as at least three works from section III of the anthology that illustrate your
argument. Useful bibliographic sources include Erkkila, Glenn et.al., Hirsch, Allen, Collins, Daly and Reddy, hooks, and Morrison.

2. Choose one writer from the pre-twentieth century section of the anthology, and read an additional short work by her that addresses the theme of motherhood. In what specific ways does this writer re-think the maternal and recontextualize motherhood for her historical time period? Please define your key terms. You might find it helpful to read the relevant historical appendices. For relevant bibliographic sources, see Garner et.al., Rich, Rosenberg, Jones, Lonsdale, Stange, Thiebaux, and the anthology web page.

3. How does religious belief inform the representation of motherhood by one of these writers: Julian of Norwich, Dorothy Leigh, Anne Bradstreet, Lydia Sigourney, Felicia Hemans, Grace Aguilar, Tillie Olsen, Ama Ata Aidoo, or Kate Daniels?

Consider the speaker or protagonist’s statement of faith (or lack thereof), religious or Biblical allusions, and invocation of God or Allah.

**Teaching “Identity and Difference”**

The introduction to Section IV, “Identity and Difference,” acquaints students with these important concepts in feminist theory, discusses how women forge identities in their life writing and in other genres, and analyzes strategies diverse women have used to inscribe racial and sexual difference. You might wish to assign these questions after students read this introductory essay:

1. How do the epigraphs from Mason and Trinh illuminate the themes of identity and difference? Define these terms in your own words. What questions do the epigraphs raise about these topics that you would like to have answered in this part of the course?

2. How have feminist theorists defined “identity politics”? What implications does the concept of identity politics have for the study of women’s literature?

3. Do you agree or disagree with critic Nancy Walker and others who believe that women’s poetry is often a form of life writing? What evidence can you find here to suggest that, for example, Katherine Philips’s, Emily Dickinson’s, or Marianne Moore’s poetry is autobiographical?

4. Do you think that Mary Sidney Herbert’s and Dorothy Wordsworth’s relationships with their writer-brothers undermined their own creative identity, enhanced it, or had little effect on it at all? Support your claim.

5. Explain what Trinh means when she urges writing women to “[resist] that very notion of difference which, defined in the master’s terms, often resorts to the simplicity of essences.”

Here are three writing projects that students might undertake after reading this section:

1. Choose a woman autobiographer whom you studied in this unit and examine the identity she creates for herself in her life writing. In what ways do you see this identity as gender and race-specific? Does her identity seem fixed, stable, fluid, contingent—or what? Please use Trinh’s theoretical essay in your discussion. Appropriate writers to consider include
Cliff, Rowlandson, Wordsworth, and Jordan. Relevant bibliographic sources include Abel, Benstock, Homans, Jelinek, Trinh, Braxton, Keeble, Neuman, and Nussbaum.

2. Discuss the ways in which these feminist writers have defined and described “difference” and its importance for women’s literature: Trinh Minh-ha, Audre Lorde, Michelle Cliff, and Buchi Emecheta. How do you see the concept of difference functioning in Cliff's and Emecheta's writing? In addition to their works in this anthology, you might want to read Cliff’s Abeng or Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise and Emecheta’s Second Class Citizen or The Joys of Motherhood. Valuable bibliographic works to consult include Fuss, Keller and Miller, Lorde, and Lionnet.

3. What issues regarding identity and racial, class, or familial difference are most salient in women’s coming of age narratives from this section of the anthology? How does the young protagonist in each story develop a sense of self (or of contingent, shifting “selves”)? Useful writers to consider include Mansfield, Welty, Carter, and Kincaid; helpful secondary sources include Davies, Featherstone, and Thompson and Tyagi.

Teaching “Resistance and Transformation”

The introductory essay for Section V, “Resistance and Transformation,” defines resistance literature, links it to ideas and metaphors of transformation, and offers an overview of women’s literature that challenges patriarchal and racial oppression. Furthermore, it explores various forms of poetry of witness and argues for a multicultural approach to women’s political writing. Among the questions to ask your students to consider after they have read the introduction and assigned selections are these:

1. How do the epigraphs from Harlow and Ogunyemi illuminate the theme of resistance and transformation? Define these terms in your own words. What questions do they raise about this topic that you would like to have answered in this part of the course?

2. What are some of the literary forms that women’s linguistic resistance has taken?

3. In what ways did three eighteenth-century writers—Mary Astell, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Mary Hays—challenge the patriarchal strictures on womanhood and women’s literature that existed during their time? How successful do you think they were? The Restoration and eighteenth-century section of the historical appendix might help you consider these questions.

4. Which examples of Holocaust literature discussed in the introduction to Section V did you find most moving, and why?

5. What does Rich mean by a “politics of location,” and how is her theoretical concept connected to her own poetry?

Here are two writing projects that you might assign your students after they read works from Section V:

1. In Resistance Literature Barbara Harlow defines “resistance literature” as “immediately and directly involved in a struggle against ascendant or
dominant forms of ideological and cultural production.” Analyze Harlow’s definition as it pertains to polemical or poetic works by one of these writers: Rachel Speght, Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Sojourner Truth, Ellen Kuzwayo, Irena Klepfisz, Toni Morrison, or Adrienne Rich. Against what “forms of ideological and cultural production” does the writer you chose struggle? How successful do you think she is in persuading her audience to her way of thinking? Among the useful bibliographic sources are Anzaldúa, de Lauretis, Felman and Laub, Forché, Harlow, Hunter and Mackenzie, Rich, COSAW, DeShazer, Delamotte, and Mohanty.

2. Caryl Churchill’s play Vinegar Tom deals with the plight of ordinary rural women accused of witchcraft in early modern England. Many historians of the Holocaust rightly accuse the Adolph Hitler and his Nazi counterparts of conducting a “witch hunt” against Jews, Romani people (gypsies), and gays and lesbians in the 1930s and ‘40s. Choose one of these witch hunts on which to focus, and analyze in depth two work(s) of women’s literature (at least one from this anthology) that implicitly or explicitly challenge those forces that sought to destroy entire segments of their populations (single Englishwomen, Jews, gays). You will probably need to do some research into either the witchcraft trials of early modern England (two good sources would be Kramer and Sprenger’s Malleus Maleficarum and Barbara Walker’s A Woman’s Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets), or on Nazi rationales for the Holocaust (good sources would be Peter Fay, Freud, Jews, and Other Germans, and Claude Lanzmann’s film Shoah). Bibliographic sources cited here that you might find helpful include Felman and Laub; Forché, Against Forgetting; and Rich, What Is Found There.
CHAPTER TWO

USING “INTERTEXTUALITIES”

“Intertextualities,” the case studies at the end of each thematic section of The Longman Anthology of Women’s Literature, foregrounds readings by five representative writers from each section: two theorists and three creative writers from different time periods. These selections can be studied together to show how disparate texts engage in dialogue with one another and how, in some cases, women writers attend to the texts of one another in making their arguments. The central features of “Intertextualities” are a set of topics for discussion, journals, and creative writing and the inclusion of two relevant essays by prominent feminist literary critics. The writing exercises are designed to enhance students’ critical thinking skills by asking them complex questions for a second reading. Ideally, “Intertextualities” will help students understand the theoretical works with which each thematic section begins, become astute literary critics in their own right, and develop skills at reading and responding to other critics’ analyses of the assigned texts.

“Intertextualities” offers post-reading ideas that allow students to do their own synthesizing of the course material. As one reviewer of this anthology, Dr. Mary Terchek from the University of Maryland, pointed out, these questions and assignments ask students to move through Bloom’s taxonomy of skill, from understanding to interpreting, synthesizing, and evaluating. The exercises also introduce a related taxonomy of knowledge, from terminology to conventions, structures, and theories.

Teaching Intertextually: Section One

The case study for “Engendering Language, Silence, and Voice” groups Virginia Woolf, bell hooks, Margaret Cavendish, Alice Walker, and Gcina Mhlophe as writers whose ideas can be fruitfully considered via intertextual reflection. In addition, Elaine Showalter’s “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” and Barbara Christian’s “The Highs and Lows of Black Feminist Criticism” can shed light on the creative strategies employed and thematic issues raised by the five focal writers.

Question one of “Intertextualities” invites students to write a fictional dialogue between two of the focal writers—Woolf and hooks, Woolf and Walker, or Walker and hooks—on the topic of women’s creative identity. This assignment allows students to use their own creative innovations and prime their critical thinking skills, as they reflect, for example, on whether Woolf is more essentialist as a white cultural feminist than, say, hooks is as an African-American socialist feminist; or on whether Walker’s criticism of Woolf’s creation of Shakespeare’s sister in A Room fails to account adequately for the existence of an eighteenth-century writer like Phillis Wheatley. Students find these dialogues challenging to write, and they can also be presented orally as performance pieces to engage the class. For beginning students, an alternate
assignment would be to write a dialogue in which they talk to Woolf, hooks, or Walker themselves, explaining what they learned from reading the focal writer and what they want most to ask her.

Question two asks students to reflect on Christian’s observation that Walker, in “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” “turned the idea of Art on its head. Instead of looking high, she suggested, we should look low.” My advanced students often problematize this “either/or” paradigm, although they find the idea of looking high vs. looking low a useful point of departure. This question urges students to place a creative writer and her feminist literary critic in dialogue, thus drawing on their own critical abilities to interpret two related arguments and positioning themselves as thinkers who contribute to the debates. As a variation on this question, students can interview Walker and/or Christian for a college talk show, an exercise that builds basic understanding and interpretive skills.

Question three asks how Woolf might revise A Room of One’s Own were she alive to read Walker’s, hooks’s, and Mhlophe’s challenges to her thesis that a woman must have money and a room of her own to write. This question offers ways for students to group the two African-American writers and the South African writer featured in this case study and consider their different representations of black “artist mothers.” Walker celebrates anonymous quilters from Alabama, Wheatley as a poet under slavery, and her own mother’s fabulous gardens; hooks ponders how and why she learned to create despite very little support at home; and Mhlophe tells the poignant story of Mhlo, a factory worker under the vicious system of apartheid who is homeless but writes her stories anyway, with a “colored only” public toilet as her artists’ studio. What would Woolf learn from each of them? Some students will say that Woolf is racist, as many white people were “back then,” while others will rush to defend Woolf as talking primarily about upper- and middle-class white women because this was her target audience. Teachers can prevent this debate from becoming polarized by asking students to imagine what Woolf might want to ask or tell hooks, Walker, and Mhlophe, since they address many of the same issues about women’s writing with which Woolf struggled sixty years earlier. By asking students what views Woolf might NOT feel it necessary to update for the 21st century, teachers can help them see the commonalities that exist among the four focal writers’ works and keep them from casually dismissing Woolf’s arguments.

Question four asks students to think of themselves as “gynocritics,” a term coined by Elaine Showalter that is defined at some length in her essay “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” and in my introductory essay to Section I, which students might want to read before answering this question. The question is designed to have students interpret, analyze, and evaluate the poems under consideration: Walker’s “Women,” Cavendish’s “The Poetess’s Hasty Resolution,” and Mhlophe’s “The Dancer.” Specifically, my goal is to have students focus on the poetic persona and consider when a woman poet’s voice seems apologetic and when it exudes certainty; what common imagery these diverse poets might share; to what extent mourning and celebration can
co-exist in a single poem; and whether we can know, or think we know, that a woman, not a man, is speaking.

Question five asks students to choose one of four gynocritical approaches that Showalter outlines in “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness”—the biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural models—and to use that model in developing a reading of Mhlophe’s story “The Toilet.” Three of the models work well. The cultural model allows students to focus on the material conditions of Mhola’s life—her unrewarding factory work, her homelessness, her domestic worker sister’s terrible living arrangement, Mhola’s fear of being caught (by humans or their dogs) while sneaking in and out of her sister’s room. In addition, the cultural approach can lead students to consider how Mhola refuses to be swayed by peer pressure from her commitment to reading and writing, visualizes her public toilet as a place of refuge and beauty, etc. The psychoanalytic model helps students approach the story by considering how internalized racial and gender oppression affects Mhola and her sister, and how racist practice in South Africa distorts the mind of the sister’s employer as well as the culture at large. The linguistic model invites students to consider what Mhola says about her own condition, the language she uses in her internal dialogues and her conversations with her sister, and the words by which the omniscient narrator wins readers’ empathy for Mhola’s plight and our admiration for her courage. The biological model works less well but might lead students to an interesting discussion of the racist categorizing so prevalent during the apartheid era: the use of four hierarchical designations—white, Indian, “colored” (racially mixed), and black—to offer so-called biological justification for subjugating Africans by deeming them non-citizens, restricting their movement, etc.

Question six asks students to think creatively about whether Cavendish could be seen as a seventeenth-century “re-vision” of Woolf’s Judith Shakespeare, someone who, despite public denigration and doubts about her own creative genius, survives rather than commits suicide. This question requires that student carefully reread chapters three and four of A Room, where Woolf spins the tale of Judith and comments on Cavendish as “harebrained and fantastical.” Some students might endorse Woolf’s view, since Cavendish can come across to modern young people as eccentric at best, or they might quarrel with Woolf’s dismissal of Cavendish, who was a prolific and serious writer. They might also recognize Woolf’s ambivalence toward Cavendish, whom she admired but hesitated to applaud as loudly as she did Aphra Behn—you might ask your students the reason why. In any event, this question requires that they re-think both Woolf’s and Cavendish’s texts and formulate their own views. Reading the Renaissance and early seventeenth-century appendix and the biographical headnotes should help students with this question.

Question seven asks students to become rhetorical theorists who examine what strategies make a feminist polemic work or fail to work. Most will know the meanings of the strategies listed as examples with the possible exception of “peroration,” which Woolf uses near the end of A Room to describe her final
argumentative flourish. This question requires a close look not at WHAT the essayist says so much as HOW Woolf goes about saying it, thereby an evaluation as well as an interpretation.

The group role play exercise can be fun, and if students prepare in advance they can learn much about the writer whose voice they choose to adopt. This exercise asks students to enter imaginatively the mind of the writer and consider what she is really saying about the focal topic, engendering language, silence, and voice. If my instructions strike you as a logistical nightmare, you can simply use a “fishbowl” technique with the student role-playing Woolf (or any writer) in the center and other students as interviewers.

Teaching Intertextually: Section Two

The case study for “Writing Bodies/Bodies Writing” encourages students to do intertextual reading of theoretical works on women and the body by the French feminist Hélène Cixous and the U.S. feminist Nancy Mairs, and to apply their theories to literary texts by Aphra Behn, Djuna Barnes, and Audre Lorde—three of the most explicit writers about embodiment from this section. You might call students’ attention to the fact that Mairs cites Cixous and have them discuss how and why she uses Cixous to critique mind-body dualism. In addition, critical essays by Catherine Gallagher and Shari Benstock offer insights into the historical circumstances in which Behn and Barnes wrote, as well as the aspects of writing the body that most intrigued them.

Question one asks students to apply two metaphors that Cixous uses, those of woman as “confiscated body” and as “uncanny stranger on display,” to dramatic texts. Behn’s The Lucky Chance and Barnes’ To the Dogs are fascinating plays to analyze in light of Cixous’s statement. Both Behn’s Julia and Barnes’ Helena reclaim their bodies as their own “property,” albeit in different ways, and both challenge patriarchal constructions of them as sexual objects and “uncanny strangers”—that is, as mysterious others meant to serve as sexual fantasies for certain desiring men. Some students might be familiar with Freud’s discussion of the uncanny, which can illuminate Helena’s cryptic statements in useful ways. Gallagher’s article on Restoration women and their writing as disputed property provides historical data for understanding the self-preserving and sexually autonomous motivations of Behn’s female characters. The Restoration and eighteenth-century section of the historical appendix will also be useful for students to read. With introductory students you might begin by asking whether they have ever experienced or witnessed a situation on campus in which women were treated as “confiscated bodies” or “uncanny strangers on display,” leading from there into links between their experience and the literature.

Question two asks students to come to terms with the Western emphasis on mind/body dualism as discussed by Mairs and to consider how some texts by women undermine this dualism. Mairs undermines it by examining how her physical disability projects itself onto a psychic she has consulted. Cixous subverts it through comic resistance to reductive associations of male with
intellect and female with body; at the same time she uses language playfully and innovatively to assert women’s complex affiliations with their own bodies, especially as they write in “white ink” from their breasts. Barnes in “Ladies Almanack” rewrites the heterosexist script by presenting lesbians as sexual agents, while Lorde defines the erotic as a life force to be tapped not just during lovemaking but also while working, dancing, writing. For introductory students you might put on the board a list of dichotomies—activity/passivity, sun/moon, culture/nature, man/woman, etc.—and let students discuss their connotations before turning to the theoretical analysis.

Question three introduces students to the term “somatophobia,” which those who know Greek roots will recognize as “fear of the body.” It is useful to prepare students for this question by asking them to consider the various cultural and religious messages that promote somatophobia: prohibitions on nudity, masturbation, or sexual activity outside of marriage, for instance, as well as myths of “vagina dentata,” various cultural and historical forms of ascetic practice, or a culture of thinness that leads many women to eating disorders. Behn and Lorde challenge somatophobia by highlighting the body’s pleasures and women’s right to define and experience those pleasures on their own terms. The comic old men in Behn’s The Lucky Chance reveal their fear of female sexuality and their own impotence quite explicitly, and students might want to debate whether they fear the body itself or their own bodies’ vulnerabilities. Gallagher’s view that Behn embraces the role of woman playwright as “new-fangled whore” will strike some students as a radical reclamation of the denigrating language used to subdue women in patriarchy, while others will see Behn as upholding male assumptions that equate women’s sexual expression with whoredom. Lorde calls her treatise “Uses of the Erotic,” and students might want to analyze her various definitions of “erotic.”

Question four departs from a quotation from Benstock’s “The Lesbian Other” that invites students to consider how Behn and Barnes “return woman’s body to woman’s control” in their texts. Students might want to debate what Benstock means by this phrase, and I find it useful to point out that heterosexual women as well as lesbians in these texts strive for this control, so that students do not assume that the quotation applies only to writers or characters who are lesbians. Students will find many examples of women assuming bodily control in The Lucky Chance, especially Laetitia and Diana; for Julia the question is more complicated, since she will stay with Sir Feeble indefinitely and feels she has been used by Gayman, even though she still loves him. Still, Julia more than her two counterparts insists on controlling the terms on which she gives her body and the issue of public perception as well. It might be worth noting that in Ladies Almanack Barnes writes the lesbian body in graphic terms to amuse her private audience of female friends living near one another in Paris in the 1920s; the work was published much later, after most of them had died. Your students can then discuss the advantages and disadvantages of such “coterie writing” in restoring “woman’s body to woman’s control.”
Question five asks students to play with the words “bawdy” and “body” in considering how Behn, Barnes, and Cixous use comedy in their reclamation of female (or perhaps feminist) erotics. Students can compare and contrast Barnes’ erotic language and double entendres in “Ladies Almanack” with Cixous’s in “The Laugh of the Medusa.” They might examine what Behn’s female characters in The Lucky Chance tell each other about their sexual desires and their aversion to the old men they have married. The question also asks students to read Cixous subversively as “exploiting” the female body in the positive rather than negative sense of this verb, to position women who write the body-bawdy as sexual agents rather than victims.

Question six asks students to compare and contrast the ways in which Lorde’s and Cixous’s essays draw links between erotic energy and creative energy. You can ask students (perhaps in small groups or through journal writing) to start with the personal and assess how their own erotic and creative lives are linked. They can also discuss how Lorde distinguishes the erotic from the pornographic, what Cixous means when she says women write with the “white ink” of mothers’ milk, and with what creative/erotic legacy each writer leaves us as readers.

Question seven asks students to examine Behn’s critique of marriage as a social institution. You might find it helpful to assign with this question the Restoration and eighteenth-century historical appendix, which talks about emerging views of companionate marriage during the period. Gallagher’s article is also under scrutiny here, and students can debate whether she is correct in suggesting that Behn equates marriage between old men and young women with sexual slavery, and whether in fact Behn objects to marriage in general or to loveless marriage between unequals.

The group writing and performance exercise allows students to choose their favorite lines from Cixous (or another of the featured writers), comment lyrically on it, and blend it creatively with lines chosen by peers. The result is a found poem of sorts, or a performance piece that can be a moving or comic “Cixous Chorale.” I once did this exercise with Adrienne Rich’s “Twenty-one Love Poems” and found students enthralled during their peers’ performance as discourse was transformed through collaborative re-creation. Of course, this exercise cannot be easily done with shy or self-conscious students, so you might want to make it voluntary or offer it as a journal-writing option. Some students will write their part beautifully but not feel comfortable performing it in class; they should be allowed to have someone else read their lines if they desire. Discussion afterward about why and how the performance piece worked or didn’t work is crucial, as is group reflection on what this exercise helped them learn about Cixous’ feminist themes, voice, and arguments.

Teaching Intertextually: Section Three

The case study for “Re-thinking the Maternal” draws connections between theoretical essays on motherhood by Susan Rubin Suleiman and Patricia Hill Collins, and shows how they can illuminate Kate Chopin’s The Awakening,
Bessie Head’s “The Village Saint,” and Beth Brant’s “A Long Story.” Critical essays by Margit Stange on The Awakening and Paula Gunn Allen on Native American depictions of the earth as mother add helpful perspectives on the material under consideration.

Question one departs from Suleiman’s assertion that women’s writings about motherhood fall into two categories, those that view it as a source of conflict and those that view it as a source of “connection to world and work.” Asked to place The Awakening, “The Village Saint,” and “A Long Story” into one of these two categories, students will most likely both appreciate Suleiman’s perception, and see a potential problem with assuming that a literary work must fall into one “camp” or the other. While Chopin’s novella clearly presents motherhood as conflictual for Edna Pontellier, her friend Adele Ratignolle is apparently quite content in her role as “mother woman.” The eponymous saint in Head’s story appears to be a nurturing, giving mother but ultimately reveals herself to be selfish and manipulative. This story raises the issue of abuse of maternal authority; it questions what it is that mothers have a right to claim from their adult children, and whether communities (Head’s rural Botswana or anti-welfare contemporary America, for that matter) are all too ready to demonize mothers. Motherhood is clearly a source of personal meaning and desire for both Native American protagonists in Brant’s story; the conflict comes when the dominant culture deems certain kinds of mothers unfit and legislates the morally reprehensible right to take children away from “bad” mothers. Students might discuss issues of cultural genocide and homophobia presented here.

Question two again features a quotation by Suleiman, this time in relation to Rosellen Brown’s exploration of both the guilt and intense energy that some mothers bring to their interactions with their children. In asking students to consider how Chopin addressed this theme some seventy years before Brown, I invite them to think about how a theorist’s analysis of a contemporary writer can also be used to describe an earlier writer’s work on the same subject matter. Since Brown’s story “Good Housekeeping” is also in the anthology, students might compare the mother’s frustration with her child and her art in that story with Edna’s inability to be a “mother woman” in The Awakening. Kate Daniels’ poems about combining motherhood and poetry writing can be discussed in contrast to Brown’s and Chopin’s fiction, since Daniels is very affirmative of her maternity despite the difficulties it causes her as a poet. With beginning students, you might simply ask, “When, if ever, does a mother have the right to be selfish? How do these literary works answer that question?”

Question three asks students to consider the role not only of “bloodmothers” in racial ethnic women’s cultures and writing, but also of “othermothers,” those women in African American and Native American communities who care extensively for children not their own, but whom they perceive as belonging to the group. The question allows students to recognize points of contact between Collins’ and Allen’s essays as well as between the cultures for which they speak. The questions about Brant’s and Head’s stories are intended to help students probe the ways bloodmothers and othermothers function in the
stories, and to consider the narratives’ source of conflict: who or what would rob these women of their maternal powers, and why?

Question four uses as its point of departure a quote from Stange about voluntary motherhood as a form of “self-ownership,” and urges students to reflect upon the absence or presence of self-ownership for the protagonists in Chopin’s and Brant’s fiction. Since Chopin’s novella and half of Brant’s story are set in the 1890s, but in radically different racial and class communities, students can consider the role of race and class privilege in effecting self-ownership for mothers. Many will also see that gender unites Edna and Brant’s protagonists, none of whom can freely claim her children or her maternal self.

Question five invites students to probe Chopin’s characterization of Edna as “not a mother woman” in light of Stange’s assertion that Edna is nonetheless “inescapably a mother.” The distinction between “mother woman” and “mother” will be interesting for beginning students to discuss, as well as that adverb “inescapably.” A discussion of the lack of birth control and divorce options for late nineteenth-century women will help women’s studies students appreciate Edna’s cultural context more fully; Stange’s article does a nice job of laying out these realities. In linking Chopin’s and Head’s “failed” mothers, students can consider narrative point of view: do the omniscient narrators sympathize with, condemn, or feel ambivalent toward the “bad mother” protagonists?

Question six offers students a chance to examine together the two Native American writers featured in this case study, Paula Gunn Allen, a Laguna Sioux Pueblo from the U.S., and Beth Brant, a Bay of Quinte Mohawk from Canada. Students might want to do research on the particular customs and attitudes toward mother-child bonding of each tribe, but such research is not necessary for them to see that both Allen and Brant equate the separation of a child from its mother and from the tribe with the loss of cultural identity. Discussing the Native American spiritual values outlined explicitly by Allen and implied in Brant’s narrative will also help students in reading works by other Native American writers in this anthology who do not focus on motherhood, e.g. Zitkala-Sä, Joy Harjo, and Louise Erdrich. The historical phenomenon of requiring Native American children to attend government-run boarding schools and “unlearn” their native language in favor of English, a common occurrence between 1890 and 1940, may shock some students who have no prior knowledge of this history. Likewise, the fact that many lesbian mothers in contemporary societies lose custody of their children if they “come out” may surprise some students. Students in women’s studies classes might want to debate under what circumstances, if any, governments have the right to remove children from their parents. Audre Lorde’s “Chain,” which addresses incest, might be a provocative addition to this discussion, and you might also consider Newt Gingrich’s proposal in the mid-1990s to remove children living in poverty from their welfare mothers and place them in orphanages.

Question seven asks students to link Allen, Collins, and Brant in considering the role of memory as a form of “continuance rather than nostalgia” in all three texts. The role of memory in insuring a culture’s survival, and the role of mothers and “motherwork” in handing memory down through the generations,
are themes that students will find compelling in the texts and in relation to their own families and cultures as well.

The creative writing exercise gives students an opportunity to study a character’s voice in depth and try to reproduce it in her or his own words, as well as a chance to probe the subject of maternal legacy—what mothers leave to their children, how, and why. The oral history project offers four variants on an established form of feminist fieldwork, the maternal interview. Some students will welcome the chance to talk openly with their own mothers or other mothers about the difficulties and pleasures they had in combining motherhood and creativity in their lives; others might prefer to talk with a woman they know less intimately and focus less on her personal story than on her strategies for balancing work and family. Others will see this as a chance to talk across racial or ethnic differences about the commonalities women share as mothers as well as the distinct problems that exist for each group. Whichever choice your students make, they will probably find inspiration from the process and material of the interview itself. Moreover, they will benefit academically from the effort to analyze their findings, and to link the voice of their subject and their own voice with the insights into motherhood offered theoretically by Suleiman and Collins.

Teaching Intertextually: Section Four

The case study for “Identity and Difference” features Cliff’s autobiographical “If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire,” and one of the most difficult theoretical essays in the anthology, Trinh’s “Not You/Like You”—difficult because of its use of theoretical language. You might want to explain the meaning of “postmodernism,” “poststructuralism” (see Raman Selden, A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory, 2nd ed.), “otherness,” and “identity politics” (see Diana Fuss, Essentially Speaking). It will also help students to read my introduction to the “Identity and Difference” section of the anthology before they embark on the case study.

Mary Terchek has suggested an exercise to help beginning students understand the concepts of identity and difference. She first explores the terms “self” and “other” and discusses with students the psychoanalytic process of projecting one’s self onto another, as well as how to treat the other as a figure deserving of respect. She then introduces the concepts of “identity” and “difference,” noting that often students realize immediately that these terms are more abstract. To illustrate, she draws on the board a large circle and puts five smaller circles around it. She asks students to fill in their own circles on a piece of paper, putting in the large circle what most identifies them at this point in their lives, and in the surrounding circles putting other identifying factors. She then collects the papers, and she and the students process identity and difference through discussion of the exercise. Terchek notes that many people define themselves primarily by their values, and secondarily by their gender, religion, race, etc. (though this may not be the case for students of color or strong feminists). In discussing their responses to this exercise students
come to understand problems of identity and self-knowledge (a few usually cannot fill in the center), as well as the problem of difference. They can then begin to consider various ways of communicating across differences.

Once these terms become demystified, most students will find it challenging to examine both the issues of women writers’ creative identities and the differences among writing women in light of Cliff’s and Trinh’s theories. This case study also brings together selections by Phillis Wheatley, Emily Dickinson, and Ingrid de Kok that grapple with issues of identity, subjectivity, “writing home,” and difference. Critical essays by June Jordan and Joanne Feit Diehl invite students to consider further the topic of women and poetic identity, and they reinforce some of Cliff’s and Trinh’s theoretical concepts in language that students should find accessible.

Question one asks students to define the key terms “identity” and “difference” in their own words, using Trinh’s essay as a point of departure, and to choose a passage from Wheatley, Dickinson, and Cliff in which the writers seem to be constructing or delineating their identities. Although many passages can serve to illustrate, I find it useful to contrast Wheatley’s ambivalent (though perhaps ironically so) definition of herself as a member of the “sable race” in “On Being Brought from Africa to America” with her affirmative description of a black male artist in “To S.M., A Young African Painter.” Dickinson’s “Publication—is the Auction” is her most obvious poetic credo, but students might also choose passages from “The Soul Selects her Own Society,” “Dare you See a Soul at the White Heat?”, or “My Life Had Stood—a Loaded Gun,” all of which can be read as addressing the theme of creative identity. Cliff’s discussion of Jamaica as an ambivalent home, and of red as the skin color she inscribes in “If I Could Write This in Fire,” lends itself nicely to this question’s core issue.

Question two about Wheatley’s, Dickinson’s, and de Kok’s poetry as a form of “life writing” can best be grappled with if students have read the introduction to the “Identity and Difference” section of the anthology, where I cite several critics on the subject of autobiography, life writing, and female self-representation. The question essentially asks students to look closely at poetic and critical texts and consider certain metaphors the authors use for women’s creative identity: “sketching a self,” claiming a “gendered subject,” authorizing “miracles,” and “shifting personae.” For advanced students of literature, this can also be a genre question—that is, it invites students to draw connections between women’s poetry and autobiography as literary genres, and to consider whether, for example, T.S. Eliot’s dictum that “the man who suffers must be entirely separate from the mind that creates” (from “Tradition and the Individual Talent”) in fact holds true for most women poets.

Question three asks students to consider Trinh’s definitions of identity and difference; the simultaneous construction and deconstruction of identity that occurs in the writings by Wheatley, Dickinson, and Cliff; and the extent to which Jordan’s and Diehl’s essays help us understand the struggles to forge an autonomous poetic identity that Wheatley and Dickinson undergo. With beginning students you can foreground one part of the question rather than all three. The parts are linked through the metaphor Trinh uses of “I/not I,” the
meaning of which advanced students will find stimulating to discuss. How is an "I" formed by these women writers, and what effect on that formation does an awareness of and dialogue with the “not I” have?

Question four invites a comparative study of fire imagery in Cliff’s essay title, Dickinson’s metaphor of the blacksmith’s forge and its “White Heat,” and Wheatley’s association of the painter S. M. with fire. Students can be asked to consider fire not only as a metaphor but also as a rhetorical device. They can also focus on the argument of each literary work, analyzing what vision of creativity, race, and gender each writer explicitly or implicitly urges readers to consider.

Question five asks students to consider the particular plights that creative women of color face in trying to articulate their literary voices against the grain of majority culture. The question circles back to issues of engendering language, silence, and voice, and you might want to ask students to read or re-read that section’s introduction as they grapple with this question’s topic. “Talking Back” by bell hooks would be an interesting supplementary reading. Silence and distortion of voice can plague women writers of color more than white writers because of the cultural forces that would deny speech to “minorities.” Both Trinh and Cliff articulate this concern explicitly while Wheatley articulates it implicitly, as is revealed in Jordan’s essay on her. Students will understand Cliff better if they know something about colonialism and the ways in which colonial powers, particularly in this case England in the West Indies, claimed the right to create their own society as superior to that of the indigenous populations they were subjugating; see The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature, ed. A. Donnell and S. L. Welsh. “Cultural appropriation,” “enslavement,” and “internalized oppression” will be useful terms for students to consider here.

Question six asks students to analyze the theme of self-deprecation or denial in works by Wheatley, Dickinson, and Cliff. Alongside the denial students can find self-affirmation, however. You might also ask them to consider the externally imposed denigration to which these writers were exposed (due primarily to race in Wheatley, to gender in Dickinson, and to race, gender, and sexual orientation in Cliff). This question requires students to find examples and to explore the tensions between self-denial and self-reclamation with which many women writers struggle.

The creative writing exercise encourages students to undertake their own autobiographical explorations in the genre of their choice—a poem, play, essay, interview, etc. It also asks them to demonstrate understanding of the theoretical concepts of identity and difference, particularly the notion that identity is not fixed and singular but is instead fluid and multiple. “What do identity and difference mean, really, in my own life and the lives of my family members?” is an interpretive question this exercise is designed to probe. As people living away from home for the first time, traditional aged students will appreciate a chance to discuss what home means to them, how a writer might choose to “rewrite home,” and under what circumstances it might ever be necessary or desirable to “radically disrupt” given definitions of home.
Teaching Intertextually: Section Five

The case study for “Resistance and Transformation” features a theoretical essay by U.S. poet Adrienne Rich and a polemical essay by South African autobiographer Ellen Kuzwayo. Rich’s “Notes toward a Politics of Location” and Kuzwayo’s “Nkosi Sikelel’i Afrika (God Bless Africa)” address ways in which literature across cultures can participate directly or indirectly in movements for social change. Rich’s and Kuzwayo’s essays can enter into fruitful intertextual dialogue with the anti-slavery poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the feminist and anti-slavery speeches of Sojourner Truth, and the political poems of Carolyn Forché. Historical essays on Barrett Browning by Ann Parry and on Truth by Nell Irvin Painter add further insight into how literature can inscribe resistance to the status quo and contribute to political transformation.

Question one asks students to consider Rich’s “Notes toward a Politics of Location” as a source for evaluating whether feminist thought today is sufficiently multicultural and multivoiced. This question raises issues crucial to women’s studies students regarding the global nature of feminism and the multiple interpretations of feminist theory. These students may be interested in debating whether feminist movements, present and historical, have served all women or just a privileged few. Moreover, they might consider what roles race, nationality, class, etc., have played in determining how central feminism has been in changing individual women’s lives and those of entire groups—e.g. African American women in the U. S., or African women under apartheid in pre-1990s South Africa. Although alliances between white women and women of color constitute a subject of both Rich’s and Kuzwayo’s polemical essays, they bring different racial, national, sexual locations to their treatment of this theme; literature students might explore the points of contact and divergence that their essays reveal. With beginning students the focus might be on defining the “keywords”—e.g., “politics of location” and “white circumscribing”—that these writers offer.

Question two asks students to draw parallels between two textual representations of resistance to racist, patriarchal ideologies. What ideologies slavery, war, and apartheid promote can be subjects for women’s studies class discussion, but this question’s literary focus is on how Truth as an orator and Barrett Browning’s runaway slave as a narrator resist their own oppression. Barrett Browning’s former slave and Truth, an actual former slave, use linguistic rebellion, subversive rhetoric, and religious allusions in interesting ways that students will need to analyze.

Question three has two parts. The first part asks students to apply Rich’s phrase “struggle for accountability” and her resistance to “white circumscribing” to her own poems, namely the more autobiographical poems from “Inscriptions,” “Origins” and “History.” The second part, which is more appropriate for advanced students, asks them to compare her efforts to avoid “white circumscribing” to those of her literary foremother, Barrett Browning. Understanding how and why Barrett Browning composed “Runaway Slave,” which is discussed in Ann Parry’s essay, will help provide students with a
context for this work. “Notes toward a Politics of Location” should help them establish a context for Rich’s poetry, or you might also refer to my essay in NWSA Journal, fall 1996, on Rich’s Dark Fields of the Republic as an intertextual comment on “Notes.” You’ll probably want to discuss at some length the terms “white privilege” and “white circumscribing”; Peggy Macintosh’s essay comparing white privilege and male privilege would be a good one to assign women’s studies students.

Question four addresses the issue of reception of Barrett Browning’s “Runaway Slave,” a topic students might be interested in researching and one that Parry addresses in her essay. When a poem is written to invoke moral outrage, as this poem was, what distinguishes it from a polemic? This is a useful question about genre to have English majors consider. The other parts of the questions ask for close reading to determine how and why the poem’s form, allusions, and melodrama work (or don’t work) to make its argument convincing through a blend of emotional and logical appeal; and how and why the slave delineates her own “politics of location” where and as she does—at an important American historical site. She is a transgressor on at least three levels: she has run away from slavery, killed her half-white child, and is “talking back” to her oppressors. Hooks’ “Talking Back” might be helpful for students to read here.

Question five invites students to do a bit of historical reflection and research into important events that the three featured poets—Rich, Barrett Browning, and Forché—choose to emphasize: the Cold War, slavery and the abolitionist movement, and the U.S.-supported civil war in El Salvador during the 1980s. Among the formal and thematic strategies these poets use to express their resistance are questioning the rhetoric of government authorities, highlighting the private more than the public sphere, expressing moral outrage, and envisioning a more just and inclusive society (or at least a righting of some wrong) in their poems’ final lines.

The group research assignment asks students to do traditional research into what happened and why during the bombings of Hiroshima, the allied victory in World War II, and the Salvadoran civil war; this part of the assignment might be enough for beginning students to undertake. More advanced students can also read survivors’ testimonials from these periods—testimonials readily found in both newspapers and scholarly accounts of these events (see especially Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman’s Testimony). An outgrowth of this historical study could be an evaluation of the various ways that theorists and historians interpret the historical record. Another will be further reflection upon genre, as students consider what and how poetry can provide witness in ways different from fiction, newspaper articles, interviews, and scholarly assessments of historical events.

I hope the activities included in “Intertextualities” will be creative and inviting assignments that will help students blend enjoyment of women’s literature and informed critical and sociocultural analysis. I also envision these case studies as helping students draw connections between their journal writing, class discussion, group assignments, and final research projects.
CHAPTER THREE

STUDY QUESTIONS ON FOCAL WRITERS AND THEORISTS

In my experience, one of the most time-consuming demands that new teachers of women’s literature confront is the task of devising study questions that students can use for pre-class reading, writing, and reflection. I like to offer students a list of questions to guide their reading of a text, and I allow them the option of either choosing one of my questions to respond to in their journals, or writing a question of their own. Since I have selected five writers from each of the anthology’s sections to foreground in “Intertextualities,” I include below additional questions on these writers’ literary works that you might find helpful to assign or to pose during class discussion.

Selections by Woolf, hooks, Cavendish, Walker, and Mhlophe

A. Questions on Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own—

1. How can Woolf’s complex attitude toward women and anger best be described? Consider the passage(s) in which she is turned away from the library, the British museum scenario, her comments about women serving as looking glasses for men (all in Ch. 2), her advocacy of incandescence (Ch. 3), her critique of Charlotte Brontë (Ch. 4), and any other passages you deem relevant.

2. Who was Judith Shakespeare, and why does Woolf find it necessary to invent her? What does Judith’s plight help us to understand about women in early modern literary history? Write a poem or an essay in Judith Shakespeare’s voice, presenting her views on language, silence, and voice.

3. What has been the collective experience of the women who comprise what we (if not Woolf) might call a “female literary tradition”—the early English writers whose lives and works she chronicles in Ch. 4? What can an aspiring woman writer today learn from these women’s efforts to break silence and find voice?

4. A Room of One’s Own has been called a postmodern text by some readers because of the multiply mediated voices of its speaking subjects, its strategic use of digressions and interruptions, and its refusal to resolve paradoxes or contradictions and thus seek closure. Find a working definition of postmodernism in a dictionary of literary history or theory, and discuss whether you think A Room can be considered postmodern, and why or why not.

B. Questions on hooks’ “Talking Back”—

1. hooks claims that challenging the “right speech of womanhood” and choosing instead “defiant speech” has strengthened her as “an independent thinker and writer.” What does she mean by “right speech”
and “defiant speech,” and what factors and influences caused her to embrace one instead of the other?

2. How does choosing to write in a pseudonym help hooks to “construct a writer-identity”? Do some historical research to determine how the strategy of the pseudonym differs for hooks from that of Charlotte and Emily Brontë (Currer and Ellis Bell) or George Eliot in the nineteenth century.

3. Explain hooks’ reasoning when she argues that the current public interest in black women’s writing is not necessarily something to celebrate without reservation. Do you agree or disagree with hooks? Why or why not? Try to give examples of black women writers whose works you have read and enjoyed.

4. In a different essay Hooks urges feminists to develop “an overall artistic movement to encourage and support black women,” and she goes on to enumerate some forms this movement could take. Imagine yourself with the resources (money and space, in Woolf’s terms) to help initiate such a movement: what would your agenda and goals be, and why?

C. Questions on Cavendish’s poems and “To All Writing Ladies”—

1. What images and strategies does Cavendish use in her poems to apologize for the inadequacies of her verse, and in what ways does she subversively claim the right to forge a poetic voice?

2. Woolf describes Cavendish as a “disfigured and deformed” writer who “might have been a poet” had circumstances been different for women in seventeenth-century England. Based on your reading, do you consider Woolf’s assessment of Cavendish accurate, or would you argue that Cavendish does achieve the status of noteworthy poet? Explain your reasoning.

3. Cavendish describes her book as either a dying woman (“The Poetess’s Petition”) or a fledgling child (“An Excuse for So Much Written upon My Verses”). What effects does her use of such anthropomorphizing and feminized images have on the poems’ tone and their audiences, past and present?

4. Images of nature as disease-ridden characterize both “Nature’s Cook” and “To All Writing Ladies,” works that otherwise seem quite different in genre, theme, and tone. How do such images function in these works, and why might a poet of Cavendish’s era and artistic temperament be drawn to them?

D. Questions on Walker’s “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens”—

1. How and why does Walker interrogate Woolf in this essay? Consider at least three issues regarding women’s artistic struggle on which you
believe Woolf and Walker disagree. With whose viewpoint are you more sympathetic, and on what grounds?

2. Many feminists claim that as women, our source of strength is rooted in both the personal and the collective. In what ways does Walker blend personal testimony with analysis of black women’s collective experience in her essay?

3. In much of the liberation literature of Latin American, African, and U.S. people of color, song plays a crucial role as a source of spirituality, creativity, and resistance. How and where does song function as a vehicle of liberation in Walker’s essay?

4. Woolf claims that “we think back through our mothers if we are women,” and on this point Walker would seem to agree. Through which artistic foremothers and contemporary mothers does Walker think back, and to what end? Does she think back through any literary fathers of significance? Why or why not?

E. Questions on Mhlophe’s poems and “The Toilet”—

1. African-American literary critic Deborah McDowell has argued that the thwarted female artist figures prominently as a theme in black women’s writing. Please analyze this theme as it unfolds in Mhlophe’s “The Toilet,” drawing if you like on hooks’ theory and Walker’s essay as well.

2. Community plays a major role in many works of fiction by African and African-American women, who present characters as either nurtured within or painfully outside of a “circle of caring” (critic Barbara Christian’s term). How does the presence or lack of community affect the daily struggle and creative quest of Mholo in “The Toilet”?

3. Based on your reading of “The Toilet” and A Room of One’s Own, what might Gcina Mhlophe say to Virginia Woolf about the woman writer’s need for money, one’s own room, and incandescence if she were able to speak to Woolf today?

4. Literature by modern South African writers has often documented the struggle against the vicious apartheid system that was maintained in that country from 1948 to 1994. What gestures against apartheid are evident—stylistically, thematically, rhetorically—in Mhlophe’s poems “Say No,” “The Dancer,” and “Sometimes When It Rains”?

Selections by Cixous, Mairs, Behn, Barnes, and Lorde

A. Questions on Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa”—

1. What does Cixous mean when she urges woman to “write her self,” to “write about women and bring women to writing”? In what ways does she envision writing the body—reclaiming the erotic, using the “white ink” of
“mothers’ milk,” and breaking “the taboo of the pregnant woman”—as challenging a “phallocentric” (male and penis-dominated) order? Do you agree with Cixous that writing the body has such potential? Explain.

2. Do you think Cixous risks “essentializing” a woman’s body by presenting it as the focus of her feminist theory—that is, does she assume that some essence of femininity is located in women’s sexual organs and erotic zones? If so, does she reaffirm or contradict the patriarchal association with woman as all body, as the “dark continent” there for man to explore? Explain why you think essentialism is or is not a problem in Cixous’ essay.

3. Cixous says it is “impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded—which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist.” To what extent and in what ways might “The Laugh of the Medusa” itself be said to “define a feminine practice of writing”? What does/would such a practice look like?

B. Questions on Mairs’s “Reading Houses, Writing Lives: The French Connection”—

1. What links does Mairs see between the houses in which we live and the bodies we inhabit? How does she present her own illness and embodiment—“my self as a body”—in this essay?

2. What does Mairs mean when she claims that her gender “shapes my relationships to both the spaces I occupy and the language in which I meditate on those spaces”?

3. What textual and theoretical links, or intertextualities, can you find between Cixous’s ideas about women’s embodiment and Mairs’s? Discuss several instances in which their thinking intersects, and consider in particular Mairs’s citation of Cixous in her discussion of eroticism.

C. Questions on Behn’s The Lucky Chance—

1. In what ways does the predicament of Belmour and Leticia, and their solution to that predicament, challenge the institution of marriage itself? In what ways do they fail or choose not to challenge this institution? Cite specific passages in your response.

2. How do Gayman and Julia manage to become lovers in Behn’s play? What do their mutual and different desires, their trickery of the dense Sir Cautious, and the solution Behn offers (Julia’s being bequeathed to Gayman if Sir Cautious dies), tell us about the playwright’s comic, erotic, and feminist vision? Refer to Gallagher’s article in your reply.

3. Though popular in 1686, The Lucky Chance was immediately criticized for indecency and was performed again only once in the eighteenth and
never in the nineteenth century. From your knowledge of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (you might consult the historical appendix), what in this play would have offended potential audiences? Why might this play have been very popular with audiences when it premiered in London at the Royal Court Theatre in 1984?

D. Questions on Barnes’ To the Dogs and Ladies Almanack—

1. From Helena Hucksteppe’s point of view, what is wrong with Gheid Storm and the way in which he approaches her? On what grounds does Barnes critique traditional masculinity and enforced heterosexuality in this play?

2. Why does Helena agree with Gheid when he says “You’re horrible!” and equivocate when he declares, “But somewhere you’re vulnerable”? Is Helena, as Barnes presents her, a horrible woman, a vulnerable woman, neither, or both? Fill in the gaps in this modernist text by explaining your response.

3. In what ways does Barnes offer a lesbian creation myth by presenting the story of Dame Evangeline Musset? By what comic strategies does Barnes reveal that Dame Musset’s sexual passion for women endures throughout her life, not just in her youth? Consider Shari Benstock’s essay on Barnes’ treatment of the “lesbian other” in your response.

E. Questions on Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic” and poems—

1. How does Lorde define the erotic, how is eroticism linked to power, and how does she distinguish between the erotic and the pornographic? How do her definitions of eroticism, power, and pornography illuminate your own?

2. Discuss Lorde’s treatment of the theme of incest in “Chain.” How would you describe the speaker’s voice (the “I”) in this poem? The voices of the young girls? What effect does the poem have on your understanding of incest and your understanding of poetry of witness?

3. Analyze one of Lorde’s poems in light of the claims she makes about eroticism in “Uses of the Erotic.” For example, you might consider how you responded to the sexual explicitness of “Love Poem,” or how “Restoration: A Memorial” inscribes the erotic even though it does not take sexuality as its primary theme.

Selections by Suleiman, Collins, Chopin, Head, and Brant

A. Questions on Suleiman’s “Writing and Motherhood”—
1. Summarize in your own words Suleiman's overview of how “the psychoanalytic project” has traditionally viewed motherhood. What problems does Suleiman find with the psychoanalytic interpretation of motherhood, and with what insights does she agree? With which aspects of Freud’s, Deutsch’s, Chodorow’s, and Klein’s views of motherhood, as presented by Suleiman, do you agree or disagree? Explain your views.

2. Suleiman notes that many women writing about motherhood offer “oppositional themes—guilt vs. love, mother’s creative self vs. child’s needs, isolation vs. commitment.” Choose your favorite writer from Section Three of this anthology and analyze which of these oppositional themes her literary works feature. If you find none of these themes in the writer's treatment of motherhood, discuss the ways in which her presentation differs from the model Suleiman posits.

3. Suleiman assumes that the “writing mother’s fantasy” exists and undergoes transformation in its “fictional elaboration.” She goes on to analyze Rosellen Brown’s “Good Housekeeping” as a mother’s fantasy about “the momentary triumph of aggression over tenderness.” How does your own analysis of “Good Housekeeping” as a maternal fantasy intersect with and differ from Suleiman’s? Explain your reasoning.

B. Questions on Collins’ “Shifting the Center”—

1. How does Collins define “motherwork,” and why does she consider it an especially important concept for understanding the experiences of racial ethnic mothers? Please connect your analysis to Collins’ assertion that “for women of color, the subjective experience of mothering/motherhood is inextricably linked to the sociocultural concerns of racial ethnic communities—one does not exist without the other.”

2. What problems does Collins see with mainstream (or white) feminist theory’s treatment of motherhood? What does she think is gained by “placing racial ethnic women’s motherwork in the center of analysis”? How has your own understanding of motherhood been enhanced by Collins’ argument that race and class should be crucial considerations in any investigation of motherhood?

3. Key issues for racial ethnic mothers, Collins suggests, are survival, power, and identity. How does she define and develop each of these concepts in her article? Choose a work of literature by one of the women of color and/or lesbians represented in this section of the anthology—e.g., Brooks, Brant, Pratt, Dove, Moraga—and consider the ways in which survival, power, and identity affect the racial ethnic and/or lesbian mothers depicted there.

C. Questions on Chopin’s The Awakening—
1. Early in The Awakening Chopin’s narrator describes Leonce Pontellier looking at Edna “as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage.” Later Edna determines to no longer be “one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions.” In what ways does Chopin present both women—as wives, daughters, and mothers—and children as the objects and possessions of powerful men in this novella? In what ways does she counter such representations? Consider Stange’s thesis as part of your response.

2. Numerous feminist critics have argued that Adele Ratignolle represents the “mother woman” that Edna cannot be, while Mademoiselle Reisz represents the artist who “dares and defies,” which Edna likewise cannot be. Agree or disagree with this interpretation, using quotations from the text to support your claims.

3. What effect do you think each of the following has on Edna’s choice to commit suicide: a. learning to swim (“the voice of the sea is seductive…”); b. becoming involved with Robert Lebrun; c. becoming involved with Alcee Arobin; d. Adele’s admonition to “think of the children”; e. any other (you name the factor). Again, explain your reasoning.

D. Questions on Head’s “The Village Saint”—

1. South African critic Craig MacKenzie speaks of Bessie Head’s “co-authorship with the villagers of Serowe” in The Collector of Treasures, the book from which “A Village Saint” is taken, as an accommodation between her need for self-validation and her honoring of communal identity. In what ways might this also describe Head’s characterization of Mma-Mompati? What conflicts develop between this character’s desire for self-validation and her communal identity, and how are the conflicts resolved, if indeed they are?

2. How does Head use the techniques of African oral tradition in her narration of “The Village Saint”? Consider, for example, the tone and narrative style of her opening and closing paragraphs, her use of proverbs and gossip, her reliance on humor and exaggeration, and her use of such phrases as “the whole village.…”

3. What perspective on the mother-son bond and the mother and daughter-in-law relationship in rural Botswana does “The Village Saint” offer? What assumptions about duty, generosity, and appropriate maternal behavior underlie the villager’s responses to Mma-Mompati’s actions?

E. Questions on Brant’s “A Long Story”—

1. Patricia Hill Collins claims that an important dimension of “racial ethnic women’s struggles for maternal empowerment” is “the process of keeping the children that are wanted,” and she analyzes Brant’s “A Long
Story” as one literary text that develops this theme of children of color at risk. Consider Brant’s treatment of the two Native American mothers, one from 1890 and the other from 1978: what risks do they share across time, and in what ways do their struggles to keep their children differ?

2. What effect does the structure of Brant’s narrative have on its presentation of key themes? You might want to discuss the story’s inclusion of dual narratives, its use of epigraphs, its clipped sentences, its first-person point of view, and any repeated images that link the two narratives (e.g., braids, breath, howls).

3. Although Brant’s narrative focuses on maternal loss, the narrators also affirm their own identities. How and where in the story do you think their most important affirmations occur? How might these assertions of identity function as a form of maternal resistance?

**Selections by Cliff, Trinh, Wheatley, Dickinson, and de Kok**

A. Questions on Cliff’s “If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire”—

1. Cliff suggests that “to be colonized is to be rendered insensitive. To have those parts necessary to sustain life numbed. And this is in some cases—in my case—perceived as privilege.” Analyze this quotation from Cliff, and use it to evaluate the position from which one of the following writers launches her argument regarding colonialism, identity, and privilege: Jamaica Kincaid, Buchi Emecheta, Paula Gunn Allen.

2. How does Cliff define “colorism” in the context of growing up Jamaican, and in what ways does her essay represent an attempt to expose or resist this system? In what ways does Cliff see colorism and colonialism intersecting?

3. Cliff claims that in writing this essay, “I surprised myself with the violence of my words.” Find three or four passages in which you view Cliff’s language to be violent and explore how and why it qualifies as such. Do you think a “violent rhetoric” can be effective in this type of autobiographical and polemical essay? Why or why not?

4. Cliff has described her writing as seeking wholeness through fragmentation. In what ways, stylistically, can this essay be considered fragmented? In what ways is this fragmentation represented thematically? Is Cliff trying to “find wholeness” in this essay—and what does this phrase mean: to Cliff, to you, to a feminist theorist such as Trinh T. Minh-ha?

B. Questions on Trinh’s “Not You/Like You: Postcolonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference”—
1. What does Trinh see as the problem with the concept of “identity,” as traditionally defined? In what ways does she suggest that conceptualizing “difference” and “a practice of subjectivity” can offer women a viable alternative to conventional notions of identity?

2. Consider the three examples that Trinh uses to explore the shifting meanings of identity and difference: “the veil as reality and metaphor,” “the use of silence... within the context of women’s speech,” and “the question of subjectivity.” How will re-examining identity and difference as “interlocking questions” help women to understand these issues better?

3. Explain in your own words Trinh’s use of the insider-outsider paradigm in this essay, and consider how it applies to the literary voices of Emecheta, Cliff, Kincaid, and/or de Kok. In what ways does each writer explore her complex identity as both insider and outsider in her work? What is she inside and outside of?

C. Questions on Wheatley’s poems—

1. Do you find the language and tone of Wheatley’s “On Being Brought from Africa to America” resistant to racist constructions of blackness, complicitous with racist definitions of blackness, or both? Consider June Jordan’s analysis of this poem in her essay on Wheatley as you respond, and cite relevant lines and images from the poem itself.

2. What perspective on creative inspiration and affiliation between artists does Wheatley articulate in “To S.M., a Young African Painter, On Seeing His Works”? Agree or disagree with Jordan that Wheatley’s naming of Moorhead as a black artist rather than a servant is important to this poem’s meaning, and explain your reasoning.

3. In her essay on Wheatley, Jordan repeats a number of sentences and phrases that for her have particular bearing on Wheatley’s extraordinary life and writing: “It was not natural. And she was the first”; “Phillis Miracle Wheatley”; “Was it a nice day? Does it matter?” Why do you think Jordan uses these lines repeatedly, and what light does each of them shed on Wheatley’s poetry?

D. Questions on Dickinson’s poems—

1. In an essay on Dickinson that is not included in this anthology, Adrienne Rich argues that the poet “chose her seclusion, knowing that she was exceptional and knowing what she needed.” Agree or disagree with this quotation, using “The Soul Selects her Own Society” and “Publication—Is the Auction” as the textual basis for your analysis. Be sure to consider Dickinson’s formal as well as thematic strategies in these poems.
2. What types of psychic extremity does Dickinson explore in poems 258, 280, 341, and 512? Consider especially her use of such images as the “Seal Despair,” “Imperial Affliction,” “Boots of Lead,” “Hour of Lead,” and “Bomb Abroad.”

3. Joanne Feit Diehl argues that whenever the self appears in Dickinson’s poetry, it is associated with “a scene that dramatizes the struggle with dependence, faces the challenge of submission, and wins through to the hard-won position of transcendence or release.” Consider Dickinson’s “My Life Had Stood—A Loaded Gun,” one of her most frequently and diversely analyzed poems, in this light. Who or what is the “self” in this poem, and does it undergo the sort of process that Diehl outlines? Explain your reasoning.

E. Questions on de Kok’s poems—

1. In “Our Sharpeville” how does de Kok capture the shame and ambivalence that some young girls are taught to feel because of their gender? How does the poem inscribe a sense of white privilege and complicity in the apartheid system? How does it function as a subtle poem of resistance and transformation?

2. Literary critics have debated whether de Kok’s “Small Passing” offers a vision of healing and solidarity by which black and white women in South Africa can find common ground, or appropriates the painful experiences of black women during apartheid in way that is presumptuous. Where and on what terms would you as a reader enter this debate?

3. “Transfer” is located in a particular moment in the history of South Africa, the early 1990s, when Nelson Mandela was released from prison and political exiles with the African National Congress, who had been living abroad for their own safety, felt able for the first time in many years to return home. How would you describe the setting into which “the exiles are returning,” according to de Kok’s viewpoint in this poem? What knowledge about South Africa do de Kok’s poems make you wish you had?

Selections by Rich, Kuzwayo, Barrett Browning, Truth, and Forché

A. Questions on Rich’s “Notes toward a Politics of Location” and “Inscriptions”—

1. How do poetry and politics intersect for Rich in “Notes toward a Politics of Location” and in “History”? Consider her identification as North American, white, lesbian, Jewish, and feminist. What does she feel compelled to do
as a political poet, and what ethical and aesthetic guidelines does she offer for other feminists to evaluate?

2. Using the four poems from “Inscriptions” as maps, trace the contours of Rich’s feminist millennial vision—her view of America and its system of justice (or injustice) at the end of the twentieth century. Consider, for example, her definition of comrade, her attitude toward movements, her fears of “nostalgia, stagnation,” and the teacher’s slogan that she offers, “IN EVERY GENERATION ACTION FREES OUR DREAMS.”

3. In “Origins” and “History” who is speaking, to whom, about what, and in what tone? How do Rich’s formal devices offer clues to her speaker’s identity and aims—specifically, her use of quotations, historical allusions, rhetorical questions, parentheses, and direct address?

B. Questions on Kuzwayo’s “Nkosi Sikelel’i Afrika (God Bless Africa)”

1. Kuzwayo’s essay was written during the mid-1980s, when South Africans demonstrating against apartheid were encountering particularly violent clashes with police and other government officials. What acts of resistance does Kuzwayo attribute to black women in South Africa, and in what ways does her essay serve as a tribute to these women engaged in struggle? Why does she stress race and gender here?

2. In what ways does Kuzwayo explore in “Nkosi Sikelel’i Afrika” what Rich calls a “politics of location”? How does Kuzwayo define herself as a woman and a political resister? What possibilities for transformation does she envision for South Africa?

3. Using Kuzwayo’s historical perspective as your point of departure, analyze the discursive strategies by which either Zoë Wicomb or Nadine Gordimer (both South African writers included in this section) articulate the conflicting yet intersecting demands of race, gender, and class in their narratives. Please cite specific passages from both essay and story.

C. Questions on Barrett Browning’s “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” and "A Curse for a Nation”

1. How does Barrett Browning use the rhetorical devices of direct address, pathos, religious allusion, and repetition (especially of black and white) to enhance the speaker’s emotional appeal in “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point”? Consider in your answer Parry’s assertion that “by the end of the poem melodrama has opened a space in which the contradictions of American society are not only revealed but shown to be a threat to the existing order.”
2. How does the prologue in “A Curse for a Nation” work to help the poet claim the right to write a political poem? What gender stereotypes does Barrett Browning’s speaker reify or overturn in this Prologue?

3. What precisely is the nature of the curse that Barrett Browning’s speaker levels against the United States for supporting the institution of slavery? In what ways does Barrett Browning’s presentation of America in “A Curse for a Nation” compare and contrast with Rich’s presentation of her country in “Notes toward a Politics of Location” as “stuck for forty years in the deep-freeze of history”?

D. Questions on Truth’s speeches—

1. How would you characterize Truth’s approach to resistance in these speeches? What and how does she resist? Consider her voice, tone, metaphors, and historical and Biblical allusions.

2. How does Truth claim an identity based on gender as well as race in “Ain’t I a Woman?” Who is her audience for this speech, and how effectively do you think she relates to listeners then and readers today? Explain your reasoning.

3. Historian Nell Irvin Painter argues in “Ar’n’t I a Woman?” that the version of Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech reprinted in this anthology—the speech recounted by the white feminist Frances Dana Gage—is at least partly Gage’s invention, since she dramatizes Truth’s speech for her own political purposes. What effect does Painter’s analysis have on your understanding of Truth’s speech? What issues do Truth’s speeches and Painter’s argument raise about literacy, women’s voices, and the mediated text?

E. Questions on Forché’s poems—

1. In which of Forché’s El Salvador poems do you find what critic Mary DeShazer has described as “an important interventionist strategy of resistance poetry: the dismemberment of the poet’s individual identity and its subsequent reconstruction in solidarity”? Cite relevant passages and explain both the quotation and your application of it to Forché.

2. Forché has said that the poet of witness “writes his or her wound, as if such writing were making an incision. Consciousness itself is cut open.” How do “The Garden Shukkei-en” and “The Testimony of Light” illustrate poetry of witness as a form of incision in a wounded consciousness? Again, cite appropriate passages in your response.

3. Forché has claimed that “The Colonel” is a poem trouvé, a found poem, the transcription of an actual experience she had in El Salvador. What is
a found poem, and in what sense is this a poem at all, as distinct from a prose narrative or a testimonial?
CHAPTER FOUR

STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING A FEMINIST CLASSROOM

In both women’s literature and women’s studies courses I like to begin by explaining that although many kinds of feminism exist in the world today, to me feminism means a belief in the social, political, economic, and sexual equality of women and men; and that I have conceived of this class with a feminist perspective in mind. I usually talk briefly about the development of women’s studies as an interdisciplinary area of inquiry and the academic arm of the women’s movement. If the course is in women’s literature I discuss the development of feminist literary theory and criticism. I also explain that a feminist approach to pedagogy involves questioning the power structures that underlie the traditional classroom, one in which the teacher has sole responsibility and authority for the class and operates according to what Paulo Freire has called the “banking model” of education: students pay money to attend class, the teacher lectures, they take money out in the form of passive knowledge and (they hope) good jobs. As an alternative I discuss a collaborative model of learning in which the teacher does indeed have some authority, as the person with the most training in the subject and the one who determines grades, but in which students and teachers work together actively to explore new forms of knowledge as a community.

I find it helpful to offer some guidelines by which a feminist classroom can most effectively operate. These guidelines include sitting in a circle (or, if the class is large, in a two-tiered circle), agreeing to come to class thoughtfully prepared, agreeing that hate speech of any sort is not acceptable in a university classroom, listening respectfully to the ideas of others during class discussion even when (especially when) you disagree, and allowing each person who wishes to speak to do so once before anyone in the class speaks twice. We discuss these guidelines as a class, and I invite students to express any concerns they may have about the guidelines and suggest any other ones they wish to propose. At times we have added guidelines that students request—for example, that English majors agree to explain their comments in language non-majors will understand. Whether or not you choose to offer guidelines, it is important to a feminist classroom for pedagogy to be discussed as an aspect of the learning experience rather than left unstated. The Center for Research on Women of Color at Memphis State University publishes a list of rules for classroom behavior to avoid hate speech.

Although many types of activities and assignments can work well in a feminist classroom, I will discuss here five with which I have had success: group work, academic journals, collaborative writing, writing portfolios, and oral history projects. I will also mention ways of building classroom community, handling personal revelations in the classroom, and coping with student defensiveness or alienation.
Group Work

Collaborative learning can take place most effectively in small groups, especially when the class is larger than fifteen in number and it is difficult to hear everyone’s ideas in a general class discussion. I use the following guidelines when dividing my class into groups:

• Offer at least three topics or questions for discussion, or have students generate topics, and let students choose their group according to interest. I often ask them to address one of these focal topics before class in their journal, then form groups according to the topic about which they wrote. I have found that this method works much better than assigning groups arbitrarily or forming set groups that work together for the entire semester. As an alternative students can generate their own topics for discussion.

• Where possible, encourage groups of five or seven to form rather than groups of four or six. This size allows diverse views to emerge without the sort of pro/con polarizing that can occur if groups are divided evenly. Groups of five or seven are also small enough that everyone’s voice can be heard.

• Let the groups talk among themselves for at least ten minutes before you begin to circulate from group to group. Your role as teacher is to respond to questions that have emerged, or occasionally to “troubleshoot” if you realize that an altercation has developed, not to be the person to whom each group member’s comments are directed.

• Ask each group to choose two or three recorders to take notes and then be responsible for sharing those notes with the entire class during the general discussion. Having more than one recorder allows for different points of view to be shared and keeps one talkative student from monopolizing the group and the general discussion.

• Keep time flexibly. In a seventy-five minute class I usually allow twenty minutes for group discussion, but if students are obviously engaged in fruitful dialogue and want more time, I offer it.

• Have each group summarize its discussion and report its conclusions to the class as a whole, and allow time for questions and further discussion to emerge. This sharing of collaborative knowledge is often the best aspect of group work, since it can allow students to revise, reject, or reclaim their original point of view about a literary work.

Class presentations constitute another form of group work, for which preparation should be done outside of class. In most of my women’s literature and women’s studies classes I ask students to sign up for either a group or a paired presentation, usually to introduce supplementary theoretical, critical, or
historical material to the class, and to plan their strategies of presentation before class, consulting with me if necessary.

Academic Journals

Calling the journal that you ask students to keep an “academic” one helps them understand it as a place to record responses to course material, not a place to analyze college life or a diary of daily activities or emotions. That said, I do encourage them to explore parallels between the themes of a text or the conflicts of a protagonist and their own gendered experience. Students can respond to course material in a variety of ways: by addressing topics that you assign (see Intertextualities in the anthology, the study questions in this IM, and the anthology web page for ideas); copying out quotations that they see as central to the meaning of a text and analyzing them; writing and answering their own questions about textual meanings and strategies; responding to a preceding class discussion; making intertextual links between course readings; and including newspaper clippings, cartoons, interviews, or other material related to the writer or themes of the assigned text.

I usually ask students to write in the journal before each class and to bring it with them to class, since journal entries can be valuable sources of class or group discussion. Although I rarely give students the opportunity to read an entire entry in class, I often ask them to share their opening paragraph or summarize their entry briefly to members of their small group, or occasionally to the class at large. Journals can also be useful when a lively debate must end suddenly due to time constraints; having students “wrap up” discussion in their journals allows them to complete their thoughts about a prior exchange.

How often to read academic journals varies according to the teacher’s time and preference, but I like to collect them at least twice, near midterm and near the end of the course, in time to return them with comments on the last day of class. My goal in writing comments in the margins is to enter into intellectual dialogue with a student on the themes and texts under discussion, not to correct grammar and sentence structure, although if errors of this sort detract from a student’s critical thinking I will say so. Because the journals usually count for 25% of a student’s grade in my classes, I evaluate them with a letter grade at the end of the semester to indicate what I see as the overall quality of the writing, thinking, and effort. This means that if the journal is incomplete or otherwise unsatisfactory at midterm I discuss the problem with the student and offer an opportunity for completion or revision. Other feminist teachers prefer to leave the journals ungraded in the belief that students will write more freely under this condition.

Collaborative Writing

Composition theorists Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg point out that research is a social act, collaborative in that researchers build on the written
work of others and, in science and business, often work in teams. Thus it makes practical as well as feminist sense to encourage students to collaborate on writing and research projects in a women’s literature or women’s studies class. The suggested research projects that accompany the “Using the Sectional Introductions” part of this IM, as well as the cultural studies prompts and case study questions in the anthology, all lend themselves well to collaborative approaches. Since they are multifaceted, student collaborators can either gather data and actually compose their responses together after considerable dialogue or divide a project or question into parts, with each student writing a draft of her or his part, sharing it with the other(s), and revising it after discussion and modification.

I also have students do collaborative writing as part of their group presentations to the class by asking each group or pair to devise together a one-page overview of their presentation and give it to their peers as a handout. If they are presenting supplementary critical, theoretical, or historical material, the handout should include a substantial paragraph or two summarizing their source’s thesis and argument, a brief analysis of two or three key points raised by the critic or theorist that the students found especially useful, and several questions that link the critical work to the text(s) we’ve read recently and that will generate class discussion of the critical material everyone has read in common.

Writing Portfolios

I sometimes ask students to submit at the end of class a writing portfolio that includes everything they have written for class with the exception of their journals. This means that students present together in one notebook, on or near the last class, their proposal for their midterm paper, the graded paper itself, any revision of that paper that I allowed, the notes and handout for their class presentation, their proposal for the final paper, the final paper itself, and any newspaper clippings, interviews with writers, photographs, etc. that they consider relevant to the course. One advantage to using writing portfolios, a time-honored device in composition classrooms, is that students take the writing process more seriously and can develop a sense of accomplishment and intellectual growth by gathering together and reflecting on all of their work. Another advantage is that you can use the writing portfolio as a means of evaluating a student’s overall performance in the course, and thereby determine a final grade.

Oral History Projects

In women’s literature classes I sometimes offer oral history projects as a final paper option, asking students to interview a published woman writer in our community (or in their community of origin) about her own struggles and accomplishments as a writer, as well as which women writers, or works by
women, have influenced her most profoundly and why. If I have developed the course around one or more of the five themes by which this anthology is organized, I encourage students to ask questions about such topics as breaking silence and finding voice, or writing the body. I usually point out to students that a good interview is a form of collaboration and that they should follow certain rules of courtesy, such as making an appointment in advance, arriving on time, preparing open-ended (not yes/no) questions in advance, using a tape recorder only if the subject is comfortable with it, taking thorough notes as unobtrusively as possible, and listening carefully and respectfully to all responses without entering into argument or debate, although entering into dialogue can be fruitful.

One women's studies assignment with which I have had success is to have students interview their mothers or another woman who has been influential in their lives. At the end of this manual is a handout I have used to prepare students to undertake this oral history project in an introduction to women’s studies course in which The Longman Anthology of Women’s Literature is a text. Oral history projects help students to recognize that not all learning comes from classrooms, textbooks, and libraries; the people they know and admire can also be valuable resources for collaborative learning.

Building Classroom Community

Sitting in a circle allows everyone both to see the person speaking and to respond through eye contact and body language; this helps to build community from the first day of class. At this initial class an “icebreaker” exercise can also help: for example, in a women’s literature course, students can divide into pairs, introduce themselves, and discuss with one another what interest in writing by women they bring to the class; then each person introduces her or his partner to the class. I usually conduct this exercise before I discuss with students the syllabus and core material of the class, so that they will be more comfortable and already have a stake in the class when I review goals and requirements. Moreover, I encourage students to join me in learning everyone else’s name in the first weeks of class, and I have sometimes jokingly made it a contest.

In some courses I set up computer list-serves and invite students who wish to do so to post their journal entries the day before class to share with their peers. If the list-serve collaboration takes off, I try to skim student entries before class and incorporate their ideas and concerns into class discussion. Establishing a list-serve allows students to exchange ideas about and frustrations with the texts they are reading and strengthens their intellectual and personal connections. If your students do not have e-mail access, you can put a large group journal on reserve in the library and encourage students to share their thoughts with their peers by writing briefly in it once a week. All entries must be signed rather than anonymous, however, so that everyone is responsible for his or her comments.
Several weeks before a major paper or project is due, I ask students to go around the circle and briefly describe the topic on which they are writing. I encourage them to respond to each other with questions or ideas for secondary sources and urge those working on related topics to share library and internet resources. Inviting students writing on similar subjects to group rather than individual conferences in my office can offer them a chance for dialogue and save me time. Once or twice each semester I invite students to have lunch or coffee together to further discuss a writer or text that the group has especially liked; I have been surprised at the excitement and camaraderie these opportunities for literary discussion have generated among the third to half of the class who attend. On residential campuses, asking students to go together to a poetry reading or guest lecture related to the subject of the course can also be a good idea; I have had success in meeting with students an hour before a poetry reading to discuss over coffee a few poems by the visiting poet.

Handling Personal Revelations

Because women’s studies was developed at a time when the feminist slogan “the personal is the political” held sway, many teachers and some students believe that the classroom is a valuable site of personal as well as academic growth, and that the study of women’s writing should encourage students to link the literature and their lives. Although I hold these beliefs, I recognize a problem that sometimes arises when I try to practice them: that students’ desire to make revelations about their personal lives can disrupt the class in one of several ways. Such revelations can be embarrassing to other members of the class, particularly if they are of a sexual nature; they can be boring to students who do not value links between the personal and the literary and wish only to discuss the texts; they can divert class attention from the readings at hand; or they can take up so much time that the teacher cannot adequately cover the assigned material. On the other hand, discouraging students who wish to relate their personal experience to the class can seem inconsistent with feminist principles, can hurt the feelings of the speaker, and can alienate those students who wish to explore ways in which the personal is political. Clearly this is a complicated issue for the feminist classroom, and as the prevalence of this topic on feminist chatlines suggests, there is no easy solution.

My own approach is to explain to the class early on that since many subjects of our readings will relate to their lives, I encourage them to explore links between their experiences and the texts. That said, I also point out that while students are welcome to raise these connections in class discussion, there may be times in which we will have to return to the text more quickly than they might wish and that if this happens, finishing their insight in the journal can be helpful. When a student acknowledges an experience of rape, incest, sexual harassment, etc., in class, it is important to listen respectfully and supportively. I usually thank the student for sharing this insight, and if the student does not seem too upset I ask her to make explicit the connections she sees between
the literary work and her experience. If she is upset, I usually try to make the link myself in a sensitive way, thus honoring her admission but drawing the class’s attention back to the text. This strategy offers everyone an opportunity to experience empathy as well as personal and intellectual growth, since the focus is not directed to the retelling of the experience, but rather to the insight it offers into the work of literature.

Precisely how best to handle such an admission depends on the kind of admission it is. For example, last semester when my class was reading Tillie Olsen’s “Tell Me A Riddle,” one student said she liked it because it reminded her of her grandmother and told us briefly about her grandmother’s temperament and life. When she finished, I asked her explicitly to draw connections for the class between her grandmother and the character of Eva by citing a few passages that evoked her grandmother most strongly. If the admission is more painful, as it was for an incest survivor who objected to Toni Morrison’s sympathetic treatment of Cholly Breedlove in The Bluest Eye, the situation is more difficult. In that case we all listened quietly to the student’s account, I applauded her courage as a survivor in breaking silence, and I asked the class to consider the ethics of Morrison’s fiction and why, given her world view, she presents both Cholly’s and Pecola’s development as she does. This question generated a stimulating discussion about incest narratives in which the survivor participated; the discussion eventually included reflection on the Oedipus and Electra stories as incest literature, as well as a comparison of Morrison’s presentation of incest to that of Dorothy Allison in Bastard Out of Carolina. I realize, however, that this was a “lucky” experience. I have also had students make tearful personal admissions and then run out of the class, leaving everyone feeling unhappy and uncomfortable. Although there are no easy ways of handling this issue, I believe that one distinguishing feature of the feminist classroom is its openness, and that to shut off such discussion altogether can be damaging to its integrity. For more on this topic, see the “Teaching Difficult Material” section of this manual.

Coping with Student Defensiveness or Alienation

The first strategy I use when a student, or a group of students, seems angry or alienated in class is to try to locate the source of the problem, generally by talking with the student after class or asking him or her to stop by my office for a talk. Often the student merely wants a chance to express concern about a particular topic or get special attention from the teacher, and the situation will change if you hear the person out. Cases in which the alienation is more entrenched, however, can cause problems in a women’s studies class, especially when you have invited students to claim their own education and given them more authority than in the traditional classroom. The situation can be loaded: if you challenge the problem students in class, you risk seeming authoritarian and thus hypocritical; if you do not challenge them, they can disrupt the entire class.
One strategy is to identify the types of attitudinal problems you have previously had, or might expect to have, and try to prevent them from occurring. One problem of which many women’s studies teachers complain is defensiveness from male students, especially in classes that meet diversity requirements rather than serve as electives. Taking a gender studies approach can be helpful, explaining early on that the class will study representations of men and masculinity as well as women and femininity. However, if the course is resolute in its examination of women rather than gender, it can help to remind the class that women’s relationships to men—their fathers, sons, brothers, husbands, lovers, employers, many of whom are loving, some of whom are abusive—will be one important topic for discussion. Inviting male scholars who study gender issues, or male community leaders who work for feminist change, to speak in your class as individuals or on panels can enlighten both male and female students who believe that only women are interested in women’s studies.

Here are some assignments that can work well with defensive male students who think the subject matter of women’s literature does not speak to them:

1. In the “Writing Bodies/Bodies Writing” section of the course, invite students to consider or rewrite one of these poems from the perspective of the husband or lover: “The Wife’s Lament,” “Wulf and Eadwacer,” Elizabeth’s “On Monsieur’s Departure,” a sonnet by Wroth, Rossetti, or Millay. You can also direct class discussion to the writer’s treatment of men and masculinity in these works, and invite students to consider whether this treatment endorses or challenges stereotypes about male sexuality.

2. In the “Re-thinking the Maternal” section of the course you can assign the students an interview with their mother, or allow them the option instead of interviewing their father about his relationship with his mother. This keeps the focus on motherhood but allows men’s voices to be heard and taken seriously.

3. In the “Identity and Difference” section of the course, have students discuss or research the influence of important men in the lives of the focal writers; for example, Sir Philip Sidney and Mary Sidney Herbert, the painter Scipio Moorhead and Phillis Wheatley, William and Dorothy Wordsworth, or Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Emily Dickinson.

Regarding male and female students who are resistant to feminism, it can be useful to ask students to discuss their positive and negative associations with the term, and to listen openly to their views, however stereotypical; usually there will be a range of definitions and outlooks, and everyone can learn from each other. Bringing a handout from Kramarae and Treichler’s The Feminist Dictionary in which various, often humorous definitions of “feminism,” “women,” and other key terms are given can also stimulate discussion that will defuse
tension. I also reassure students that they need not consider themselves feminists to be welcome and treated fairly in this course.
CHAPTER FIVE

STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING DIFFICULT MATERIAL

I am using the phrase “difficult material” to describe selections in this anthology that some teachers of survey courses in women’s literature will find unfamiliar or especially challenging to teach. This chapter addresses ways of approaching works by women from countries other than Britain, America, or Canada, countries about which many of us will need additional background. Some of this I try to provide here in brief. For purposes of convenience as well as theoretical accuracy, I have called writers from these countries “postcolonial.” For additional sources on each postcolonial writer, see the author bibliographies near the end of the anthology. This chapter also discusses selections that must be approached with special sensitivity because of their political controversy, sexual explicitness, or painful effects on some students.

Teaching Literature by Postcolonial Women

Literature written in English since 1945 has expanded dramatically due to an influx of brilliant, exciting publications by postcolonial writers, many of whom grew up in former British colonies. Whether it is the writer’s first, second, or even third language, writing in English is always reminiscent of colonization. These writers address the ways in which British societal values intersect with, and often undermine, the values of the indigenous culture and its peoples. Memory, nostalgia, and loss often characterize such writing; it can also reflect both anger directed at the complex legacies of colonialism and a hybrid sense of identity or voice. In the contemporary literature section of the historical appendix, I assert that “writers of the former British Commonwealth have crossed symbolic borders by examining their societies’ historical pasts and entering into debates about gender, race, and class oppression. They have also considered the role of nationalism and internationalism in their countries’ movements forward.” To facilitate the following discussion I have divided postcolonial writers into groups according to the country or geographical area from which they originate.

African Women Writers— The largest group of African writers included in this anthology hail from South Africa, whose colonial legacy has been dominated in the twentieth century not by British influence, although that has been considerable, but by the vicious system of racial hierarchy known as apartheid, whose architects were primarily Afrikaners of Dutch (Boer) descent. Although racist policies have affected South Africa since the late nineteenth century, apartheid became the white-dominated government’s formal policy in 1948 and lasted nearly fifty years, only to be dismantled in 1994 when Nelson Mandela became the first democratically elected black president of the “New South Africa.” Because the history of apartheid is too complex to discuss fully here, you might want to read Ann Seidman’s The Roots of Crisis in Southern
Africa (Africa World Press, 1985), or consult my book A Poetics of Resistance (Michigan, 1994), or the winter 1996 issue of World Literature Today for sources from which to learn more about South African politics, culture, and literature.

It is important to inform your students about women in South Africa—black, white, Indian, and racially mixed—who have led the way in political rebellion against the state, beginning with Indian women at the end of the nineteenth century, who marched in Durban and Johannesburg to protest the government’s decision to outlaw traditionally performed marriages; this first act of passive resistance provided a model for Mohatma Gandhi, who lived in South Africa for twenty-one years. In 1913 and again in the 1950’s, a coalition of women demonstrated effectively against the government’s efforts to institute pass laws requiring non-white women to carry an identification card that would restrict their movement, an indignity to which black men were already subjected. From the 1950s protests came the famous slogan, “You have tampered with the women / You have struck a rock. / You have dislodged a boulder. / You will be crushed.” During the 1970’s and 1980’s women spearheaded protests against rising rent and transportation costs, supported children in the 1976 Soweto uprisings who were attacked by police for protesting their inferior education, and organized for better living wages and working conditions for black men, many of whom were miners or migrant workers, and black women, many of whom were domestic workers. In 1990 the Women’s League of the African National Congress (which was an outlawed party for decades but since 1994 has been the controlling party in the South African Parliament) was formed to, in its own words, “unite all women, black and white, young and old at a political level, so that we can participate in actively building a future South Africa that is free of sexism and oppression, especially of women.”

Works by South African writers Nadine Gordimer, Ingrid de Kok, Ellen Kuzwayo (pronounced Kuhz wah’ yo), Zoë Wicomb, and Gcina Mhlophe (pronounced Um schlo’ pay) can best be read with this historical context in mind. Gordimer and de Kok are white writers whose subject matter includes not only solidarity with black people against apartheid (both are longtime members of the ANC) but also such themes as white complicity, liberal malaise, and the complexities of family life—themes that you can invite students to discuss in reading their works. Although Gordimer’s fiction typically features middle-class, liberal white protagonists, the story I include here, “Amnesty,” offers a young black protagonist situated at a painful moment in the country’s history during the early 1990s, when apartheid was beginning to fall apart. Thousands of ANC and other political exiles came home, only to find in some cases that they did not fit easily into the new society they had worked outside its borders to establish. In her poetry de Kok struggles to come to terms with a legacy of white racism and to find ways of aligning women across races. Whether such alignments are possible, and how de Kok proposes to effect them, can be subjects for class discussion.
Kuzwayo, Wicomb, and Mhlophe are black writers who describe apartheid’s effects on themselves, their families, and their people: Kuzwayo, a social worker and community activist and now a member of Parliament, in such autobiographical writings as Call Me Woman; Wicomb, a racially mixed woman who studied and taught in England for many years, in elegiac short stories found in You Can’t Get Lost in Capetown; and Mhlophe, an actor and a director at Johannesburg’s Market Theater as well as a writer, in poems and performance pieces that chronicle apartheid’s legacy. The biographical headnotes for each writer contain additional information about her literature and personal history.

If you teach these South African writers together as a unit, it is useful to ask students to analyze their varied approaches to apartheid and to consider tone, voice, and language as well as theme. Issues of cultural and familial disruption, rage against racism and its perpetrators, views of English as an oppressive or a problematic language, and moments of solidarity in struggle between races and among members of the same race occur in each writer’s work. If you teach these writers as voices from the thematic unit in which I have placed them in the anthology, it makes sense to ask students to consider themes of breaking silence and finding voice in poems and the story “The Toilet” by Mhlophe (see the discussion of her work in “Intertextualities,” Section I); themes of identity and difference in poems by de Kok (see the introduction to Section IV); and themes of resistance and transformation in works by Wicomb, Kuzwayo, and Gordimer (see both the introduction and "Intertextualities" in Section V). Note that these writers resist sexism and economic injustice along with racism, and that Kuzwayo in particular theorizes how these discourses of resistance intersect in contemporary South Africa. I encourage students to read at least one secondary source on South Africa and apartheid during discussion of these writers, and to bring to class newspaper or magazine clippings about current events there (e.g. the shift of leadership from Nelson Mandela to Thabo Mbeke, the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the ongoing problems of Winnie Mandela).

In the disrupted cultures of other areas of Africa, writers often serve a contemporary griots, or storytellers who keep alive the history of indigenous people and the effects of colonization on them. One way to prepare students to read African women’s fiction is to discuss the role of storytelling in America as a form of cultural knowledge that is passed by word of mouth between family members and friends, and in communities. Bessie Head, born in South Africa, lived and collected stories in Botswana, a country less affected by colonialism than many other African nations because it lacked those countries’ considerable natural resources. Head’s tales record the habits, beliefs, and oral history of this relatively unspoiled land and its people, who nonetheless experience conflicts between “progress,” in the form of technology and development, and indigenous values. A question to ask students about her writing is how competing notions of progress function in her stories. Buchi Emecheta (pronounced Eh meh cheh’ ta), born in Nigeria but now living in London, blends stories about her birth nation and its customs with the cultural
dislocation that factors in the experience of expatriates in the African diaspora. Her autobiographical writings examine racism and sexism across cultures, and they invite students to reflect upon the diverse forms of power that traditional husbands have exerted over their wives under patriarchy, and that white people have exerted over blacks under white supremacy. Ama Ata Aidoo, born in Ghana, also writes stories and poems that explore the cultural dissonance that results from colonialism. Alice Walker has claimed that reading Aidoo “reaffirmed my faith in the power of the written word to reach, to teach, to empower and encourage”; you might give students Walker’s quote and ask them how Aidoo’s story in this anthology performs all four of those tasks. Students might want to compare the treatment of maternity in stories by Head, Emecheta, and Aidoo.

Women Writers from Australia and New Zealand—Although these countries can be linked due to their geographic location in the South Pacific, each has its own indigenous culture, history of colonialism, and dominant literary forms. For further information on these, you might want to see The New Oxford Book of Australian Verse, ed. Les A. Murray (1986) and Essays on New Zealand Literature, ed. Wystan Curnow (Heinemann, 1973). Although neither teachers nor students need specialized knowledge of either country to appreciate and understand their women writers, you might find it useful to note that the literature of Australia’s native people, the Aborigines, were songs performed in ceremonial spaces called bora rings and were accompanied by music, dance, and spiritual ritual; and that Aboriginal cultures existed ten thousand years before European settlement. You might also point out that New Zealand’s native Maori people viewed oral literature as dreamscapes that emerged organically from Aotearoa itself, their name for New Zealand, “the shining bright land”; and that to this day they call European settlers pakeha, stranger. Despite their differences, Australia and New Zealand can be connected as what Linda R. Williams has called “transplanted New World societies,” whose majority populations are of European descent and have thus constructed hybrid identities, and whose minority populations have experienced significant cultural loss and dislocation.

Judith Wright, one of Australia’s most famous poets, writes about representations of women’s bodies and motherhood across cultures. She also writes poems mourning the destruction of indigenous cultural practices, although she is not an Aborigine. Here is an excerpt from “Bora Ring” that you might want to share with your students:

The song is gone; the dance
is secret with the dancers in the earth,
the ritual useless, and the tribal story
lost in an alien tale.

Only the grass stands up
to mark the dancing-ring; the apple-gums
posture and mime a past corroboree,
murmur a broken chant. …
The critic T. Ingles Moore (in Social Patterns in Australian Literature, Univ. of California Press, 1971) has claimed that Wright is a poet “especially social and national in outlook… deeply concerned with the Australian earth and society.” You might have students respond to this quote; compare Wright’s voice in “Bora Ring” with that of Oodgeroo of the Tribe Noonuccal in “We Are Going,” which treats similar themes from an Aboriginal perspective; or contrast Wright’s elegiac voice in “Bora Ring” to her voice in “Stillborn” or “Letter.”

The literature of Oodgeroo (formerly known as Kath Walker), one of Australia’s best known Aboriginal poets and fiction writers, reveals her activist roots in the Aboriginal movement. In a 1986 interview with Candida Baker (cited by Celia Gilbert in Coming Out from Under, 1988) Oodgeroo described her poetry as “sloganistic, civil rightish, plain and simple.” While students might see this description as self-deprecatory, you might encourage them to consider how polemical poetry functions and whether any of Oodgeroo’s elegiac images, haunting refrains, and rhythmic repetitions resemble those of, say, English ballads, or those of Wright’s very different brand of Australian poetry. Students might also discuss how Oodgeroo’s mourning song might be considered a “ghost-form” by serving as a memorial to an indigenous culture that has virtually lost its language.

New Zealand literature is represented in this anthology through works by three women: Katherine Mansfield, Janet Frame, and Keri Hulme. Since Mansfield left New Zealand for England in her teens and is best known as a British writer of modernist fiction, few teachers will find her work difficult to teach. However, you might invite students to consider what the Australian critic Wystan Curnow means when he says Mansfield “is from New Zealand but does not write New Zealand literature.” In contrast, Curnow considers Frame a “quintessential” New Zealand writer in that she does not lose her nerve and presents odd characters who face us as lifelike. In his Twayne book Janet Frame (1977) Patrick Evans describes Frame, however, as atypical of New Zealand writers in that most “have a narcissistic thirst for identity which has sociological rather than purely artistic implications,” whereas Frame eschews narcissism, conceals many aspects of her life from interviewers, and refuses to comment on her writing. Since art and narcissism are themes of “The Chosen Image,” the story by Frame included here, you might ask students to explore these themes in the context of Curnow’s and Evans’ different evaluations of her work as a New Zealander. The Jane Campion film Angel at My Table, based on Frame’s autobiographical novel by the same title, deals beautifully with the author’s struggle with mental illness. Students intrigued by Frame’s life might view the movie and discuss how it sheds light on the view of creativity she espouses in “The Chosen Image.”

Hulme, a prize-winning Maori writer, has been compared to Carson McCullers in that both write of “outcasts who find moments of solace away from their inner turbulence and isolation in contact with one another.” This quote might be intriguing for students to consider if you are also teaching McCullers’ A Member of the Wedding or The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, or as a means of exploring the protagonist’s feelings of isolation and the solace she seeks in
nature in Hulme’s “One Whale, Singing.” An engaging discussion with Hulme appears in Spiritcarvers, ed. Antonella Sarti (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi Press, 1998), a collection of interviews with eighteen writers from New Zealand. Hulme’s prize-winning novel The Bone People (Penguin, 1986) is widely taught in courses in postcolonial literature; it contains themes of cultural dislocation, gender conflict, and child abuse and is available at a special price to professors using The Longman Anthology of Women’s Literature through our Penguin Program (see the anthology web page).

If you teach these Australian and New Zealand writers as a unit, it makes sense to discuss them in terms of the issues and historical contexts suggested above. If you teach them in the thematic units in which I have placed them in the anthology, you can ask students to compare and contrast the treatment of motherhood and maternal loss in works by Wright, Oodgeroo of the Tribe Noonuccal, and Hulme.

Women Writers from India— Indian literature is represented in this anthology by fiction by Anita Desai and Bharati Mukherjee. Since both writers now live in the United States, their work offers particularly intriguing insights into issues of diaspora and cultural difference. In addition, each writer explores the tensions that arise between traditional and modern viewpoints in families; students may want to compare their treatments of these tensions. Desai often focuses on the maladjustment of Indians living in or visiting the West; her psychological novels and stories frequently employ a stream-of-consciousness narrative technique that can be compared in intriguing ways to that of Woolf, Mansfield, Stein, or Barnes. Desai’s story “Surface Textures” can be compared to Aidoo’s “A Gift from Somewhere” in its ironic treatment of misplaced religious zeal. Mukherjee’s “A Wife’s Story” can be taught alongside other works of fiction that foreground issues of marginalization and cultural stereotyping, e.g. Kincaid’s “Xuela,” Emecheta’s “Second-Class Citizen,” and Yezierska’s “Soap and Water.”

R. J. Singh’s introduction in The Indian Novel in English: A Critical Study (Heinemann, 1977) and his chapter on Desai provide useful background for you and your students. One interesting point that he makes is that the novel as a genre came to India in the 1850s as a result of British colonialism; the first Indian novel written in English was Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s Rajmohani’s Wife (1864), the romantic story of domestic life in a Bengal village. However, the novel did not become a popular genre in India until the 1920s, though tales and extended narratives had existed for years in indigenous languages. Linda R. Williams has noted that modern Indian writing in English is a paradoxical phenomenon, since English is not the dominant spoken language of any region of the country, “and yet it is perhaps the only modern Indian literature able to cross cultural boundaries and give a sense of pan-Indian identity.” This issue of crossing boundaries and pan-Indian identity, or perhaps Indian identity in the global diaspora, provides a stimulating topic of discussion for students of Mukherjee’s fiction, most of which is set in America or Canada, although her protagonists sometime visit India or have visitors from India. Focusing on the cultural dislocation that the protagonists and their visitors experience will teach
students about the legacy of colonialism as well as the themes of Mukherjee’s fiction.

Caribbean Women Writers— As Williams notes, the West Indies constitutes a site of both disrupted Third World societies and transplanted New World ones. Although almost no indigenous people (Carib and Arawak Indians) remain, there exists a significant body of literature written by the descendants of West African slaves who were forced to work on sugar plantations from the eighteenth century on. Many of these descendants are racially mixed and speak English in various Creole or “demotic” forms.

Caribbean women’s literature is represented in this anthology by the writing of Michelle Cliff from Jamaica and Jamaica Kincaid from Antigua, both of whom live in the United States, and Dionne Brand from Trinidad, who now lives in Canada. Many of Cliff’s essays and much of her fiction deal with issues of racial and sexual identity—with the painful legacy of British colonialism, Creole language and culture, “passing,” lesbian marginalization, and “claiming an identity they taught me to despise.” With the exception of “lesbian marginalization,” all of these concepts provide a vocabulary useful for students to explore with regard to Kincaid’s fiction as well, and these two writers can be compared in their treatment of identity and difference. Moreover, both writers use young girls as protagonists; you might ask your students why. Cliff and Brand can be compared as lesbian writers who foreground issues of sexual as well as racial identity. The question of to what extent, and in what ways, writing by these three women reveals a diasporic consciousness is also a fruitful one for student discussion. A stimulating dialogue could emerge from sharing with students the view of Nobel Prize-winning poet Derek Walcott (from St. Lucia) that despite its difficulties, the “creative schizophrenia” he experiences in his own writing, and sees in other West Indian literature, can transform a fragmented cultural legacy into a source of multicultural identity and strength. Students might consider whether they think Cliff, Kincaid, and Brand would agree or disagree with Walcott on this issue.

One other note: please don’t consider a lack of expertise in postcolonial writing an insurmountable problem in teaching these women’s texts! There are classes in which professors should be experts in South Africa’s or New Zealand’s history and cultures, but this is not true of a survey class in women’s literature or women’s studies. Few U.S. teachers would choose to teach global women’s writing if they had to endure the pressure of acquiring such expertise, since most of us have been trained to teach British and/or American literature. Thus it is important to educate yourself as well as time allows and be patient with yourself as well as your students if this material seems difficult. If you can’t answer questions that come up in class, having students do crosscultural research to find the answers is a splendid idea. I always admit frankly to my students that I am self-taught in literatures other than American and British and that there is much I don’t know. This admission gives them room to enjoy the new, ask uninformed questions, and read, learn from, analyze, and evaluate this literature energetically—even though (or perhaps because) they lack specialized knowledge.
Teaching Sensitive Subject Matter

Another difficulty that many teachers of women’s literature face is how best to teach works whose themes are politically controversial, sexually sensitive, or painful to certain students. Certainly it is an honored practice to discuss controversial issues in women’s studies classrooms, but students who sign up for these courses usually expect to encounter such materials, whereas students who take literature by women do not necessarily make that presumption. Thus it is important to prepare students for the fact that some of the material we will read from The Longman Anthology of Women’s Literature will contain themes that might make them uncomfortable, especially material from the “Writing Bodies/Bodies Writing” section. Specifically, I mention such themes as abortion, infanticide, rape, child abuse, incest, heterosexual or lesbian sexual activity, U.S. imperialism, suicide, racial violence, and violence during war.

I offer this “warning” when I introduce the course on the first day and again before each class in which I expect sensitive material to appear. In doing so I remind students that everyone in class has agreed to listen respectfully to the views of others, especially those with whom they disagree, and that students can remain silent in class if they wish and write their views on the topic in their journals, where I am their only audience. That said, I also point out bell hooks’ view that a feminist classroom in which controversy and occasional discomfort do NOT occur is one that has failed—because students are unwilling to talk openly across their differences or because no one is learning much. I also acknowledge that I am somewhat hesitant to give this “warning” because I want discussion to be as open and spontaneous as possible, and not to be stilted because someone is worried about offending others; I ask everyone to join me in working to build an honest, fair, and intellectually engaging classroom environment.

When controversial material does lead to tense or unpleasant confrontations, moreover, students usually assume that the teacher’s job is to smooth over the problem. The difficulty with doing so is that you run the risk of seeming to enforce one ideological view or the other, thus alienating students who perceive you as agreeing with “the other side.” To facilitate difficult discussions, therefore, you will need to think carefully about how you want to define and use your own classroom authority. My preference is to indicate on the first day of class that many of us who are collaborating together this semester will have strong views on these controversial subjects, and that I am among those. I assure my students that I will try very hard to walk the balance between acknowledging, for example, that I am strongly pro-choice or against U.S. imperialism in El Salvador, and listening respectfully to (as well as grading fairly) those who feel differently. I also explain, however, that in a literature class it is not our job to debate these issues in a potentially polarizing way. Rather, our job is to study, analyze, compare, and evaluate the literary treatment of these themes by the diverse writers whose works we will read. As part of this collaborative process I will make sure that classroom dialogue is as
balanced and interactive as possible, and that students have many chances to select materials for discussion, present diverse analyses, and argue for the textual interpretations that they find most convincing.

Below are a few strategies that I have found helpful for teaching sensitive works and topics. It is important to keep in mind that many women in your classes will have experienced abortion, rape, child abuse, or incest, whereas few, if any, will have had first-hand experience with infanticide or U.S. imperialism abroad or violence during war, although hopefully they will have read and been concerned about these issues. The more personal the experience, the more painful it will be for young people to discuss the relevant literary works; thus if survivor stories and tears or rage do occur in the classroom, it is important for the teacher to be calm and supportive, not embarrassed or censuring.

Abortion and Infanticide— In my women's literature class I often ask students to compare Brooks' "the mother" and Sexton's "The Abortion," with consideration to the speaker's voice and tone, the poetic style in which each writer approaches this theme, and whether the writer seems pro-choice, pro-life, or ambivalent toward abortion, and how they know. A good article to have them read along with the poems is Barbara Johnson's "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion" (see bibliography for Section III) in which she discusses women poets' presentation of abortion and analyzes these two poems, as well as works by Adrienne Rich and Lucille Clifton. Having students write a dialogue between Brooks and Sexton, or between their speakers, about their treatment of or experience with abortion can also be a useful approach.

Since most literary treatments of infanticide (Barrett Browning's "A Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," Morrison's Beloved) occur in the context of slavery in the nineteenth-century United States, I usually ask a group of student presenters to research the historical context and determine to what extent slave women did commit infanticide and under what circumstances. Works by historians Paula Giddings, Gerda Lerner, and Angela Davis can be helpful along these lines. Ann Parry's essay on "Runaway Slave," included in the anthology, offers students a valuable sense of historical context and audience for Barrett Browning's work; they might want to find contemporary reviews of the poem to share with the class. When I teach Beloved I encourage interested students to read The Black Book which Morrison edited for Random House in the 1970's and which in part sparked her interest in the case on which she based Sethe's predicament, that of Margaret Garner in Cincinnati in the 1850's.

Rape, Child Abuse, and Incest— Two of the most painful rape poems in the anthology are Sharon Olds' "That Year" and "The Girl." In teaching these poems it is helpful to ask students to consider to what use poems about rape can be put. Do they simply cause pain to readers and would they thus be better left unwritten? Do they serve a cathartic purpose? How would you describe their aesthetic or testimonial value, if any? What can we learn from them about the horrors of rape and the complex possibilities of life-after-rape, of survival? This subject also emerges in Harriet Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, for although the narrator is never actually raped, we witness her struggle to avoid
rape and to gain some measure of control over her own body and sexuality. I ask students to discuss or respond in their journals to this quote from the notes to Jean Fagan Yellin’s introduction to Incidents (p. 265): “The entire system worked against the protection of slave women from sexual assault and violence, as Jacobs asserts. The rape of a slave was not a crime but a trespass upon her master’s property.”

A particularly devastating poem for some students is Audre Lorde’s “Chain,” which deals with the topic of father-daughter incest. Although there is no easy way to approach this poem, I usually begin by having students listen to Lorde read it and then discuss the anguish evident in the poet-speaker’s voice, both in the text and on the tape (Olivia Records in Durham, N.C., offers a recording of Lorde reading from Chosen Poems, Old and New). This discussion can lead to a series of questions similar to those I have listed above regarding the use of rape poems. Child abuse is also a subject of Old’s “That Year,” and students might want to consider how the poet interweaves the theme of rape, which happens to the speaker’s classmate “out there,” and the muted but evident theme of child abuse, which happens simultaneously to the speaker herself, “in here.” I also like to make students aware of the vast body of feminist literature on incest and its survival, from self-help workbooks (see especially Ellen Bass’s) to novels about incest (e.g. Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye, Jane Smiley’s A Thousand Acres, Dorothy Allison’s Bastard Out of Carolina), from film versions of these novels to studies of incest in both heterosexual and lesbian women’s literature (by Brenda Daly and Lynda Hart).

Heterosexual or Gay/Lesbian Sexuality—Since traditional aged college students often have complex and contradictory feelings about their sexuality (not unlike the rest of us!), it is hard to predict which sexual topics will provoke strong emotional responses or class controversy. However, in teaching women’s literature I have found that the presentations of adultery in Chopin’s The Awakening and Sexton’s “For My Lover, Returning to his Wife” will disturb some students, as will the presentations of lesbian sexuality in Lorde’s “Love Poem” and Jackie Kay’s “Other Lovers.” Kay’s “Close Shave” treats both gay male sexuality and adultery and can thus deliver a double shock. A few conservatively Christian students might also find offensive Margery Kempe’s lusty presentation of her relationship to God.

Regarding the theme of adultery, I like to ask students to describe the protagonist or the speaker’s sexual desire and self-definition in these works, and to consider the extent and ways in which the adulterous affair is a source of conflict, grief, and/or celebration. Some students will have homophobic reactions to works about lesbian sex, and I usually try to gently challenge such responses by noting that, if we are to do justice in this class to the diversity of perspectives that exists within women’s writing, we must analyze not only heterosexual women’s presentation of desire but lesbians’ as well, since lesbians constitute roughly 10% of the population. One strategy I have found helpful is to ask students to consider lesbian love poems alongside those of heterosexual women, analyzing the various approaches to the love poem as a
genre. This comparison can begin with Queen Elizabeth’s sonnets, move to those of Mary Wroth and Christina Rossetti, on to modern poems such as Edna St. Vincent Millay’s sonnets and Olds’ “Sex Without Love,” and culminate with Lorde’s “Love Poem” and Kay’s “Other Lovers.” Sometimes, however, it is instructive to consider together various writers’ representations of lesbian sexuality, since students need to be reminded that not all lesbians write and think alike any more than all heterosexual women do; asking students to contrast the style, themes, and tone used by Lorde, Kay, Minnie Bruce Pratt (who deals with lesbian parenthood), etc., can work well to make this point.

U.S. Imperialism— Some students who are politically conservative, or liberal students who are uninformed, may be shocked or offended by Carolyn Forché’s poems about the U.S.-sponsored war in El Salvador, such as “The Colonel” and “Message,” or by Michelle Cliff’s linking of British colonization of Jamaica with U.S. cultural and economic imperialism in the West Indies. Asking student presenters to do research on the war in El Salvador and U.S. imperialism and report their findings to the class can be helpful in defusing controversy and informing students about underreported U.S. news events. Good general sources on the war in El Salvador include Robert Armstrong and Janet Shenk’s El Salvador: The Face of Revolution (South End Press, 1986), and A Dream Compels Us: Voices of Salvadoran Women (South End Press, 1989). To understand the context from which Forché writes, I recommend her essays “A Lesson in Commitment” (Triquarterly, Winter 1986) and “El Salvador: An Aide Memoire” (The American Poetry Review, July-August 1981). Asking students to consider the difference between lyric poetry and documentary poetry can also help them better understand Forché’s poetry. In addition, you can purchase a tape of Forché reading poems from The Country between Us from Watershed Tapes, P.O. Pox 50145, Washington, D.C. 20004; students appreciate hearing her impassioned voice. Valuable feminist approaches to U.S. economic and cultural imperialism can be found in Cynthia Enloe’s Bananas, Beaches, and Bases and June Jordan’s On Call: Political Essays (South End Press, 1988); for the treatment of this theme in contemporary literature, see Constance Coiner, Seeing Red.

Suicide— Many students will find discussion of suicide difficult, whether that discussion results from its centrality as a theme in The Awakening and Life in the Iron-Mills, or whether it results from their reading of biographical information on Woolf, Plath, or Sexton. A general discussion about why people choose suicide, and whether and under what conditions it can be a justifiable choice, often engages students. I find it also helpful to remind them that these writers address a number of themes, celebratory as well as depressing ones, and urge them to approach the literary texts in search of their varied meanings and tones, whether angry, humorous, poignant, or jubilant. In addition, I point out that many works about suicide are intellectual tours de force, and whereas a writer’s theme can be depressing, her artistry can be thrilling.
When I teach The Awakening, I often ask students to respond to Carol Christ’s claim that Edna Pontellier’s suicide (if indeed they interpret her final act as such) can be viewed as a “spiritual triumph” but a “social defeat.” This activity usually helps them to make their response to suicide text-based rather than emotionally reactive, and it also helps them recognize the lack of options that Edna has due to her gender and historical circumstances, despite her racial and class privilege. Margot Stange’s essay on The Awakening, included in this anthology, also helps students to understand this aspect of Edna’s predicament and Chopin’s ironic but sympathetic treatment of it. Regarding Woolf, unless I am teaching Mrs. Dalloway, in which she presents suicide thematically through the character of Septimus Warren Smith, I tend to move quickly beyond this subject, suggesting that interested students read one of the biographies of Woolf by scholars such as Quentin Bell, Lyndall Gordon, or Hermione Lee. With Plath and Sexton it is usually necessary to grapple with their treatments of suicide, madness, and depression because these topics are so central to their poetry. I think it helps students to confront this issue head-on, discussing the fact that many people in all cultures, but especially our own, suffer from these illnesses, and that since some (though by no means all) of the sufferers are women, literature by women naturally will address these themes. Discussing the confessional as a poetic mode can be useful, as can helping students to see the bleak humor and irony with which each poet treats suicide as well as a poem’s depressing qualities. Finally, I like to note that Woolf, Plath, and Sexton remain alive to us through their writing, and that by honoring the literature we also honor their lives and achievements.

Racial Violence— Although many works in this anthology depict incidents of racial violence, students may respond with particular pain or curiosity to Gwendolyn Brooks’ “A Bronzeville Mother…” and “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till.” In teaching these works I usually ask a group of student presenters to find out what happened to Emmett Till, thus exposing those in the class who don’t know to one of the most tragic episodes of the U.S. civil rights era, and offering the class a chance to analyze Brooks’ imaginative rendering of the feelings of both the white racist who perpetrated the crime and Till’s grieving mother. Students will also find it instructive to examine the ways in which Brooks interweaves racist violence and sexual violence in “A Bronzeville Mother…” and to consider why she has the white mother speak but the black mother remain silent in this pair of poems. Toni Morrison’s Dreaming Emmett can also provide a useful perspective on this episode from the civil rights movement.

The Holocaust and Hiroshima— One aspect of World War II that many students rightfully find troubling is the Holocaust, and literary works that depict this theme can be difficult for them to read, especially if they are Jewish and their families lost loved ones, or if they perceive a lack of feeling on the part of students who may be tired of hearing about Spielberg’s film, the Holocaust museum, etc. Although I have never encountered a student who believes that the Holocaust didn’t happen or has been exaggerated, since some
pseudoscholarship to this effect does now exist, teachers should be prepared for this possibility and think carefully about how to present Holocaust literature. I have had many students for whom reading Irena Klepfisz’s “death camp” or Carolyn Forché’s “The Garden Shukkei-en,” which addresses the bombing of Hiroshima, has been quite painful; and I think the best way to honor this pain is to acknowledge that I as the teacher share it. One way to do this is to read the poem aloud, pausing for a minute or so afterwards so that listeners can process their feelings, and then invite them to write in class for five or ten minutes about the poem’s emotional impact. Students who wish to can share their writing with the class; only then, after a kind of emotional honoring has taken place, do I ask students to examine how imagery, tone, or voice works in the poem to create this impact.
CHAPTER SIX

COURSE SYLLABI AND COMMENTARY

The following are syllabi for courses that I have developed for use with The Longman Anthology of Women's Literature. Women Writers in Society is an introduction to literature by women that focuses on the conceptual themes from sections one, two, and five of the anthology: Engendering Language, Silence, and Voice; Writing Bodies/Bodies Writing; and Resistance and Transformation. Women and the Sacred explores women’s writing about spirituality and includes selections from all sections of the anthology, as well as a packet of handouts by prominent feminist theologians and literary critics. Gender and Postcolonialism focuses on women’s writing from Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and the Caribbean and explores how issues of colonialism, migration, diaspora, and the postcolonial condition affect each writer’s voice. Ethnic Literature by U.S. Women foregrounds writing by Native American, Asian American, African American, and Latina women from the United States. Finally, Introduction to Women’s Studies exposes students to interdisciplinary knowledge of the new scholarship on gender and major texts by women through the ages. Each syllabus speaks directly to the students; I have included after each syllabus commentary on the course goals and organization.

WOMEN WRITERS IN SOCIETY

COURSE OUTLINE: In this course we will examine poetry, fiction, plays, and prose by women writers, medieval to the present, from England, the United States, and South Africa. The primary topics addressed will be engendering language, silence, and voice; writing bodies/bodies writing; and resistance and transformation. We will consider several focal questions that women’s writing about these topics invites us to ask. Under what historical and psychic circumstances have women written? How have they managed to break silence and find voice, and what generic and formal strategies have they used to convey their ideas? What perspectives do women writers offer on women’s bodies—puberty, sexual desire, pregnancy, childbirth, abortion, rape, illness? In what sorts of voices and texts have women resisted the political, literary, or social status quo? We will also read essays by feminist literary theorists and critics and explore their insights.

TEXT: The Longman Anthology of Women’s Literature, ed. Mary K. DeShazer

REQUIREMENTS: An exploratory essay on some aspect of A Room of One’s Own (6–8 pp. undergraduates, 10 pp. graduate students); a final paper of critical analysis and research on a class-related topic (suggestions will be provided, 12 pp. undergraduates, 20 pp. graduate students); an academic journal; and a panel presentation (two for graduate students). The Woolf essay is due on Feb. 10 (outline/abstract by Feb. 3); the final paper on the last day of
class. I will collect journals on March 3 and April 16, and I ask that you write several double-spaced, computer pages of analysis, query, and response to the readings (or to assigned questions) before each class. Sometimes we will use the journals in our class discussions, so please bring them with you. The presentations will be scheduled throughout the semester, and you will have a choice of topics related to feminist literary criticism and to the case studies called “Intertextualities” included at the end of each section of the Longman anthology. I will use these guidelines in determining your final grade:

- Final paper 40%
- Exploratory essay 20%
- Journal 20%
- Presentations, in-class writing, and participation 20%

I request that all of you be responsible for daily attendance and promptness, for careful reading of all assignments, and for active participation in class. Please feel free to stop in during my office hours or make an appointment if you have questions about the class.

CLASS SCHEDULE


ENGENDERING LANGUAGE, SILENCE, AND VOICE


1-22 Discuss Woolf, A Room, chs. 3–4. For Tu.: Read Woolf, chs. 5–6.


2-3 *Panel presentation of feminist criticism: Showalter and Christian; discuss Mhlophe story in dialogue with Woolf and Walker. For Th.: Read poetry by Margaret Cavendish and Anne Finch from the Longman.

2-5 Discuss Cavendish’s and Finch’s poetry, and consider whether you agree with Woolf’s assessment of them in A Room. For Tu.: Read first half of Northanger Abbey, analyzing its language, voice, and coming of age theme. *Woolf paper due Tu.

2-10 Discuss Austen and Northanger Abbey. For Th.: Finish Northanger Abbey.
2-12 Discuss Northanger Abbey's gothic elements and comic vision. For Tu.: Read Shelley’s introduction to Frankenstein in the Longman and excerpts from Ellen Moers’s Literary Women and Janice Radway’s Reading the Romance.

2-17 Panel presentations on Austen’s and Shelley’s representation of the gothic tale and its relevance to romance novels and popular culture today. For Th.: Read Yamamoto and Kingston stories in the Longman.

2-19 Discuss themes of silence and voice in Kingston and Yamamoto stories. For Tu.: Read introduction to “Writing Bodies/Bodies Writing” in the Longman, also excerpt from Margery Kempe’s narrative in the Longman.

WRITING BODIES/BODIES WRITING

2-24 Discussion of writing the body, using Margery Kempe as a case in point. For Th.: Read Acts I–III of Aphra Behn, The Lucky Chance.

2-26 Discuss The Lucky Chance and Behn’s representations of female sexuality. For Tu.: Finish the play and read Gallagher’s essay on Behn, using question two from “Intertextualities” as a guide. *Journals due Tu.

3-3 Panel presentation on Gallagher’s interpretation of Behn; complete discussion of play. For Th.: Read excerpt from Jacobs’ Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.

3-5 Discuss Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl and sexual exploitation under slavery. For Tu. after spring break: Read Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa.”

3-17 Discuss Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa,” “l’écriture feminine,” and “Writing Bodies/Bodies Writing” in light of our consideration of Kempe, Behn, and Jacobs’ texts. For Th.: Read play To the Dogs, excerpt from Ladies Almanack, and Benstock essay.

3-19 Discuss Barnes’s writing, Benstock’s criticism, and representations of lesbian and heterosexual desire. For Tu.: Read poetry by Anne Sexton, Joy Harjo, Sharon Olds.

3-24 Discuss Sexton, Harjo, and Olds’ poetry: representations of women’s and girls’ sexuality and sexual exploitation. For Th.: Read Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic” and “Chain,” Mairs’ “Reading Houses, Writing Lives,” and “Intertextualities” from section II.

3-26 *Panel presentation on “Intertextualities”: Cixous, Mairs, Behn, Barnes, Lorde. For Tu.: Speght, “A Muzzle for Melastomas” and the introduction to “Resistance and Transformation,” Section V.

RESISTANCE AND TRANSFORMATION

3-31 Discuss Speght’s polemic as a resistance text. For Th.: Read Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “A Curse for a Nation” and “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point,” in Longman.
4-2 Discuss Barrett Browning’s poems as acts of resistance; consider their historical contexts, contemporary reception, and transformational capacities. For Tu.: Sojourner Truth’s speeches and Frances Harper’s poems.

4-7 Discuss Truth and Harper, resistance to slavery and sexism. For Th.: Read Anzia Yezierska, “Soap and Water.”

4-9 Discuss Yezierska’s story, considering its representation of the immigrant experience and working-class resistance. For Tu.: Read Ellen Kuzwayo, “Nkosi Sikelel’i Afrika” and Nadine Gordimer, “Amnesty.”

4-14 Discuss Kuzwayo, Gordimer, and literature’s relationship to resisting apartheid. For Th.: Read Adrienne Rich, “Notes toward a Politics of Location” and poems from “Inscriptions.” *Journals due Th.

4-16 Discuss Rich essay and consider what “politics of location” her poems reveal. For Tu.: Read Zoë Wicomb, “Bowl Like Hole.”

4-21 *Panel presentation on South African literature and feminist criticism (handouts). For Th.: Read Toni Morrison, “Recitatif,” and consider how she inscribes resistance in this story.

4-23 Discuss Morrison’s fiction in light of Rich’s theory. For Tu.: Read Klepfisz and Forché poems and consider how they represent the Holocaust, Hiroshima, and the war in El Salvador.

4-28 Discuss poems by Klepfisz and Forché. For Th.: Read Anzaldúa, “Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers,” and consider how Anzaldúa addresses all three of our focal themes: engendering language, silence, and voice; writing the body; and resistance and transformation.

4-30 Discussion of Anzaldúa, course wrap-up, and evaluations.

COMMENTARY ON “WOMEN WRITERS IN SOCIETY”

I chose these three conceptual themes on which to focus because they work well for introductory courses and because I teach “Rethinking the Maternal” and “Identity and Difference” in other women’s studies courses. Building the unit on “Engendering Language, Silence, and Voice” around Woolf’s essay allows me to teach students how to read intertextually early in the course; we study A Room of One’s Own in depth, then read Walker, hooks, and Mhlophe as explicit or implicit interrogations of Woolf. With Cavendish, Finch, and Austen, we consider whether Woolf’s assessment of their work is accurate, then go on to read them independently of her judgment. I like to end with contemporary narratives on silence and voice by Asian-American women who can be compared both thematically and stylistically.

I organize “Writing Bodies/Bodies Writing” chronologically at first, assigning Kempe’s fifteenth-century narrative, Behn’s seventeenth-century play, and Jacob’s nineteenth-century narrative to give students an idea of the diversity of style and content with which women write the body. I then use Cixous’s essay to read backward in time as well as forward to the twentieth century, and to introduce French feminist theory and the concept of “jouissance” into the course. Examining Barnes as a writer who represents both heterosexual and lesbian eroticism in her work intrigues students, and Cixous’s theories can be enlightening on this topic as well. I group Sexton,
Harjo, and Olds as three poets who write the body in revolutionary ways. Lorde’s poetry and essay offer an expanded definition of the erotic, and students enjoy debating how to distinguish between erotic and pornographic literature. Mairs’s essay introduces the topic of disability and serves as a commentary on Cixous and French feminist representations of women’s embodiment.

I like to begin “Resistance and Transformation” with one of the early feminist polemics so that students realize how long ago works of gendered resistance were written and on what terms women of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries challenged patriarchal authority and claimed their own voices. Along with Speght’s essay I give a brief history of the “querelles des femmes” (see the Renaissance and early seventeenth-century historical appendix), and we discuss her strategic use of Biblical allusions. Barrett Browning, Truth, and Harper can be grouped as anti-slavery writers; Yezierska’s story (and if time allows, Davis’s Life in the Iron-Mills) introduces class struggle as a topic of women’s resistance writing. Reading together three South African writers of resistance—Kuzwayo, Gordimer, and Wicomb—offers students postcolonial perspectives and invites dialogue with Rich’s essay “Notes toward a Politics of Location.” No women’s literature course is complete, in my view, without a work by Toni Morrison, and “Recitatif” invites discussion of narrative perspective and what Morrison calls “participatory reading” as well as the themes of interracial friendships, white privilege, and the civil rights movement. Poems by Klepfisz and Forché introduce students to the important concept of poetry of witness and to feminist perspectives on the Holocaust, the bombing of Hiroshima, and the civil war in El Salvador.

A number of texts could serve as a course wrap-up, but I like to use Anzaldúa’s essay because it raises issues of language, silence, voice, and embodiment at the same time that it inscribes resistance. I ask students to find a passage in “Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers” that they think addresses powerfully each of the course’s focal themes; we then discuss those passages as well as the title itself, which uses metaphors of language (speaking), the body (tongues), and the politics of resistance (Third World).

WOMEN AND THE SACRED

COURSE OVERVIEW: The “sacred” is a term whose modern meanings vary. For some it describes that which is holy in a religious sense, as in “sacred scriptures”; for others it connotes a reverence for nature or a spiritual approach to human existence. “Spirituality” is similarly vexed: for some it is used synonymously with religious practice or one’s relationship to a deity, while for others it is associated with a “new-age” alternative to Christianity, Judaism, or other organized religions. In this course we will examine the varieties of spirituality and approaches to the sacred reflected in works by literary women from the Middle Ages to the present, writing from England, America, Australia, and Africa. Women throughout history have pondered their relationship to God,
their ancestors, and other forms of divinity; they have offered multiple representations of the sacred, shared their faith with their loved ones, and re-envisioned the role of spirituality in their daily lives. These writers’ forms of literary expression range from poetry to journals to mourning songs, from stories to speeches to maternal treatises. The cultural and generic complexity of women’s writing about spirituality resonates beautifully with this description of “spirit” by feminist theologian Catherine Keller in Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World:

Mediating between self and other—between ancestors and futures, languages and bodies, between North and South, garbage and beauty, between apocalypse and its aftermath—“spirit” inflects a grammar of possibilities inarticulable in any single voice, simply located.

REQUIREMENTS: I ask that you undertake three major writing assignments for this course. The first is to keep an academic journal in which you discuss each writer’s approach to spirituality and the sacred, considering what she has to say about religious or spiritual experience and how effectively she presents her ideas. Please reflect also upon what these ideas mean to you as a reader and a thinker. Second, I invite you by midterm to write your own spiritual autobiography: to recount your earliest memories of religion, church, things sacred, or spiritual teachings—to explore your development as a spiritual being. You might want to trace the influence of family members; religious doctrine; priests, ministers, or rabbis; culture and ethnicity; and gender on the sense of spirituality with which you currently identify. Finally, I ask that you write a final 15-page paper of research and “intertextualities” in which you draw connections and discuss differences between the approaches to the sacred offered by any three of the writers whose works we are reading.

Your work will be evaluated as follows: academic journal, 25%; spiritual autobiography, 25%; final paper, 25%; attendance, presentations, and class participation, 25%. Since the class will have a feminist pedagogical format—it will consist mostly of discussion, oral presentations, and small-group work rather than lectures—your informed presence and active participation in the class are essential.

TEXTS: DeShazer, ed., The Longman Anthology of Women’s Literature: a packet of readings by feminist theologians Rita Nakashima Brock, Mary Daly, Catherine Keller, Sallie McFague, Phyllis Trible, Judith Plaskow, Chung Hyun Kyung, Ulrike Wiethaus, and Delores Williams.

NOTE: AT THIS POINT, THE COURSE MATERIAL CAN BE ARRANGED EITHER CHRONOLOGICALLY, FOR THOSE WHO WISH TO OFFER A HISTORICAL APPROACH, OR THEMATICALLY. BELOW ARE CLASS SCHEDULES FOR EACH MODEL.

Chronological arrangement of course material:
Women’s Voices from the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period

Week 1—Leoba of England and Germany, letter to Lord Boniface
Matilda, Queen of England, letters to Archbishop Anselm and Pope Pascal
Julian of Norwich, “The Motherhood of God,” from Showings
Wiethaus essays on letter writing, mysticism, medieval women’s spiritual practice

Week 2—Margery Kempe, from The Book of Margery Kempe
Anne Lock, seven sonnets from A Meditation of a Penitent Sinner
Aemilia Lanyer, from Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum
Essays by Trible on representations of Biblical women, handout on Calvinism

Week 3—Dorothy Leigh, “The Mother’s Blessing”
Elizabeth Clinton, “The Countess of Lincoln’s Nursery”
Rachel Speght, “A Muzzle for Melastomas”
Panel discussion: religious allusion as a tool of resistance for early women

Late Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth-Century Women's Voices

Week 4—Mary Rowlandson, from A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson
Anne Bradstreet, “Before the Birth of One of her Children,” “In Reference to her Children”
Handout: excerpt from Susan Howe’s essay on Rowlandson’s captivity narrative

**Academic journal due

Week 5—Hannah More, from “The Black Slave Trade”
Phillis Wheatley, “On Being Brought from Africa to America” and “To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth”
June Jordan, “The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America”
Essays by Williams on early African-American women’s spirituality

Week 6—Felicia Hemans, “The Hebrew Mother”
Grace Aguilar, “The Exodus—Laws for the Mothers of Israel”
Essay by Plaskow on Jewish feminist theology and spirituality; essay by Keller separation, sexism, and self.

Weeks 7 and 8—Sharing our spiritual autobiographies

Modern Women’s Voices

Week 9—Native American Women:
Joy Harjo, “Fire,” “Deer Ghost,” and “Heartshed”
Excerpt from essay by McFague on ecological feminism

Week 10—African-American Women:
Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: the Erotic as Power”
Alice Walker, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens”
Lucille Clifton, “sarah’s promise” and “naomi watches as ruth sleeps”
Essay by Williams on womanist theology
Discussion of sexuality, motherhood, black women’s art, and spirituality
Week 11—Jewish Women:
Muriel Rukeyser, “Letters from the Front” (VIII)
Irena Klepfisz, “death camp” and “Bashert”
Kate Daniels, “After Reading Reznikoff”
Tillie Olsen, “Tell Me A Riddle”
Excerpt from Felman and Laub, Testimony, on Holocaust literature

Week 12—Global Women:
Ellen Kuzwayo, “Nkosi Sikelel' i Afrika”
Oodgeroo of the Tribe Noonuccal, “We Are Going”
Ama Ada Aidoo, “A Gift from Somewhere”

Essays by Brock and Chung on women’s spirituality across cultures
**Academic journal due

Week 13—The Return of the Goddess
Mary Daly essays

Weeks 14 and 15—Student presentations of final papers; final paper due

Thematic arrangement of course material:

Early Women’s Relationships to God, the Church, and Divinity

Week 1—Leoba of England and Germany, Matilda Queen of England, Wiethaus essay on medieval women; Julian of Norwich’s treatise on God as Mother
Topics: Power and authority, letter writing as a form of spiritual practice, medieval women’s mysticism, male scribes and mediated texts

Week 2—Lock’s poetry and Calvinism, Lanyer’s poetry read alongside Genesis
Topics: belief and heresy, revisions of Eve
Motherhood and Spirituality

Week 3—Bradstreet’s poetry, Oodgeroo’s aboriginal women’s mourning song, Leigh’s and Clinton’s instruction manuals for mothers **Academic journal due
Topics: maternal poems and narratives as spiritual practice

Week 4—Hemans’s and Clifton’s poetry, Aguilar’s treatise, handout: Plaskow essay
Topics: Judaism, Biblical women, maternal sacrifice

Week 5—Daniels’ poems “Genesis I:28” and “Prayer for my Children,” Aidoo’s story
Topics: maternal gifts and spiritual legacies.

Nature, Native America, and the Sacred

Week 6—Walker, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” McFague essay on ecofeminism
Topic: women and the natural and creative world

Week 7—Allen’s poem, essay on red roots of white feminism, Rowlandson’s narrative
Topics: Native American women and spirituality; God and the captivity narrative

Weeks 8 and 9—Sharing our spiritual autobiographies

Women’s Spiritual and Sensual Lives

Week 10—Margery Kempe’s autobiography—Jesus as lover, Wiethaus essay
Topic: medieval mysticism and sexuality

Week 11—Lorde’s essay “Uses of the Erotic,” “Love Poem”; Harjo’s and H.D.’s poems
Topic: women’s spirituality, eroticism, and the sacred

Women’s Spiritual and Political Lives

Week 12—More’s, Wheatley’s, Oodgeroo’s poetry; Jordan’s essay Essays by Brock and Chung
Topic: women’s spirituality and resistance to slavery and colonialism

Week 13—Klepfisz’s poems, Rukeyser’s poem, Daniels’ poem (“After Reading Reznikoff”), Olsen, “Tell Me A Riddle;” handout: excerpt from Testimony
Topic: women write about Judaism and the Holocaust. **Academic journal due

Weeks 14 and 15—Student presentations of final papers; final paper due

BIBLIOGRAPHY (sources for the essays by feminist theologians and handouts)

Commentary on “Women and the Sacred”

I have conceived of two ways to use The Longman Anthology of Women's Literature as the central text for a course in spirituality and women's literature, a chronological and a thematic approach. Although it is possible to teach the literature effectively without bringing in “extra-literary” material, I prefer to assign essays by feminist theologians alongside it, because my course will be crosslisted with the Women's Studies Program, which emphasizes interdisciplinarity. I have included a selected bibliography of theological texts by contemporary feminist scholars that address themes related to the literature. Whichever approach you choose, it is important to offer, both on the syllabus and at the first class, flexible definitions of spirituality that will allow students who are religious in orthodox ways and those who think of the sacred in feminist or “new-age” terms to enter into respectful and lively dialogue with diverse texts by women and with one another.

The academic journal is a useful learning tool for students in a class on spirituality and literature, since it invites them to relate their own belief systems to the readings. The journal can also be a valuable teaching tool as long as teachers realize that many students consider this subject so personal, and sometimes even vexing, that they will not necessarily want to share journal entries with classmates, even in small groups; such sharing should, therefore, always be voluntary. Some will want to proselytize, and this too should be discouraged in the interest of respect for differences. I have had success with the assignment inviting students to write their spiritual autobiographies, and believe that it lets students integrate the class readings and their own religious experiences in ways that promote both critical thinking and self-reflection. However, if you wish to assign a more strictly literary piece of writing at midterm, you can ask students to choose the writer read thus far whose
approach to spirituality most closely dovetails with their own, and to analyze how their personal view of the spiritual has affected their understanding of the themes and artistic strategies of that work, and vice versa—how analyzing the literary work has affected their understanding of the sacred.

If you choose the chronological approach, you might want to assign students the appropriate section of the historical appendix as background material; for purposes of this class I have combined the early and late twentieth century. Regarding the medieval writers, teaching Leoba and Matilda’s texts together not only makes sense historically, it also allows you to discuss the importance of letters as spiritual texts for women and to consider the diversity of style and perspective that these particular letters reveal. Julian and Kempe work well together, since you can emphasize two very different ways in which these two religious women, who knew and were influenced by one another, approached mysticism, the body, and woman’s close relationship to God and Jesus in their narratives. Among the early modern writers, Lock and Bradstreet wrote a century apart and in different cultural and religious contexts; yet the two writers, juxtaposed, offer intriguing perspectives on Calvinist and Puritan doctrine, as well as a chance to talk about early women’s religious poetry as a genre and its powerful, conflicted themes of self-authorizing, self-doubt, God’s will, and free will. Students will understand better Lanyer’s treatment of Eve and the Genesis story if they have first read and discussed briefly the relevant Biblical passages; you might want to assign feminist poems about Eve alongside Lanyer’s work. Leigh’s and Clinton’s narratives can be usefully compared stylistically and as essays linking maternity and the sacred.

I like to assign Susan Howe’s essay on Rowlandson’s late-seventeenth century captivity narrative—to enhance students’ understanding of the Puritan doctrine of election, covenant theology, and the contested physical and spiritual territory of the “New World.” It is also important to remind them that no Native American women’s texts exist from this time period and to explain why not—because of the orality of the native cultures and the legacy of colonialism. Regarding the eighteenth-century writers, linking More, Wheatley, and Jordan’s essay on Wheatley offers students a look at ways in which early women writers used Christianity to argue against slavery and for racial equality, a tactic that Truth also employs in the nineteenth century. Truth, of course, often subverts Christian orthodoxy for political and rhetorical purposes. Hemans and Aguilar can be nicely juxtaposed, with Hemans, a Gentile, imagining a Jewish woman’s love for her child yet her adherence to the call for sacrifice, and Aguilar, a Jew, both instructing Jewish women in these sacrificial duties and subtly calling them into question. Modern writers are even more diverse in their approach to spirituality than are their predecessors. Rather than proceeding in strictly chronological fashion, I have grouped these writers into Native American women’s spiritual voices (Week 9), African-American women’s spiritual voices (Week 10), Jewish women and spiritual reflections on the Holocaust (Week 11), and women’s spirituality across cultures (Week 12). The return of goddess worship and the prevalence of goddess imagery in contemporary women’s poetry seems a fit ending; you can discuss early modern and contemporary
witchcraft and assign Churchill’s Vinegar Tom in addition or as an alternative. I find that students appreciate the intertextual discussions that can emerge from such groupings.

If you choose the thematic approach, you might select themes other than the five I suggest—e.g. literary treatments of Christianity, Judaism, etc. I prefer to begin with a range of women writers’ responses to God, the church, and divinity before moving to works that link spirituality to maternity, nature, sexuality, and political change. If you use these themes, you might want to assign students the introductory essays to Sections II, III, and V of the anthology, which discuss motherhood, the body, and resistance in primarily secular terms but will help to prepare students for the assigned readings. Whether you teach the course chronologically or thematically, having students present their own research in the final weeks of the class enhances collaborative learning, shows the seriousness with which you view their writing, and offers everyone a chance to reconsider the assigned writers in new intertextual ways.

GENDER AND POSTCOLONIALISM

COURSE OVERVIEW: This course focuses on poetry, fiction, and prose by contemporary postcolonial women from Africa (South Africa, Botswana, Ghana, and Nigeria), the Caribbean (Jamaica, Trinidad, Antigua, and Haiti), Australia, New Zealand, and India. In linking these women across nations and ethnicities, we will of necessity raise questions about what, if anything, justifies the use of the term “postcolonial women,” what role writing plays in producing subjective and collective consciousness, and what types of new knowledge about gender, race, migration, and diaspora these written texts bring their readers. We will also explore the literary strategies each writer uses to convey new knowledge. Our study will be guided by several topics raised by Chandra Mohanty in her introduction to Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism (Indiana UP, 1991), topics that explore connections between women’s “writing, memory, consciousness, and political resistance: (a) the codification of covert images of resistance during non-violent times; (b) the creation of a communal (feminist) political consciousness through the practice of storytelling; and (c) the redefinition of the very possibility of political consciousness and action through the act of writing.” To honor the particular historical contexts and “politics of location” (Adrienne Rich’s term) from which each woman writes, we will divide the course readings according to geographic regions. In addition, we will read several theoretical works by and about postcolonialism that I hope will enhance your understanding of the literary texts.

REQUIREMENTS: Please write a midterm and a final paper, each of which incorporates critical analysis and research. Each paper should be between twelve and fifteen pages in length and should incorporate feminist and postcolonial theory into its analysis. The first paper should examine a short literary work by one of the writers from the anthology, and should include consideration of the writer’s “politics of location” and the theme of postcolonialism in the work you select; the second paper should offer a
comparative study of two of the assigned novels. The midterm paper is due on March 17, the final paper on May 4. In addition, I ask that you keep an academic journal in which you respond before class to the focal questions indicated on the syllabus for each writer. Anyone who finishes his or her journal entry the night before class is invited to post it on our course list-serve so that peers can read and reflect on one another’s insights. This way our building of knowledge together in the class can be fully collaborative. Finally, I invite you to sign up in small groups to lead discussion about a writer of your choice on the day we are to discuss that person’s work. Since this class has a seminar format, I hope and expect that each of you will attend each class and participate thoughtfully.

TEXTS: The Longman Anthology of Women’s Literature, ed. Mary K. DeShazer

Edwidge Danticat, Breath, Eyes, Memory
Keri Hulme, The Bone People
Anita Desai, Journey to Ithaca
A packet of handouts on feminist and postcolonial theory

Week 1 Introduction: Literature by postcolonial women: What is “postcolonialism”? What themes, genres, and politics do these writers embrace in their writings? How do they link “writing, memory, consciousness, and political resistance?” For Week 2: Read Mohanty’s introduction to Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism (handout), the introduction to The Postcolonial Studies Reader (handout), and Rich’s “Notes toward a Politics of Location.”

Week 2 Discuss Mohanty’s use of the term “Third World women” and compare it with the term “postcolonial women.” What does Rich mean by a “politics of location,” and why is this phrase useful in studying women’s literature? How does the introduction to The Postcolonial Studies Reader enhance your understanding of gender and postcolonialism as theoretical and literary topics? For Tu.: Read Gcina Mhlophe, “The Toilet” and her poems, along with Ellen Kuzwayo’s “Nkosi Sikelel’i Afrika” and Nadine Gordimer’s “Amnesty.”

AFRICAN WOMEN’S WRITING

Week 3 Mhlophe: Consider ways of undermining apartheid adopted by her poetic speakers and by the narrator of “The Toilet,” Mhlo. What literary and political strategies does Mhlophe use to convey her themes? Kuzwayo: How does her autobiographical challenge to apartheid compare with Mhlophe’s fictional challenge; where do the two writers intersect and diverge? How would you describe Kuzwayo’s “politics of location”? Gordimer: How is her protagonist’s experience of amnesty gendered? What issues arise when a white woman writer adopts a black woman’s voice? For Week 4: Read Zoë Wicomb, “To Hear the Variety of Discourses” (handout) and “Bowl Like Hole,” along with poems by Ingrid de Kok and Bessie Head’s “The Village Saint.”
Week 4 Wicomb: How does the theory of feminist and anti-racist discourse that she offers illuminate last week’s readings by Mhlophe and Kuzwayo? This week’s reading by de Kok and Head? What strategies for resisting apartheid does the protagonist in “Bowl Like Hole” employ? de Kok: In what type of voice(s) does de Kok, a white woman, inscribe her solidarity with black South African women? What issues of white privilege and complicity in colonialism and apartheid are raised here? Head: Although she is South African by birth, her stories are set in rural Botswana. How do Head’s themes and political concerns differ from those of Mhlophe, Kuzwayo, and Wicomb? What parallels in setting and theme can you find between “Bowl Like Hole” and “The Village Saint?” For Week 5: Read Ama Ata Aidoo, “A Gift from Somewhere” and Buchi Emecheta’s “A Cold Welcome.”

Week 5 Aidoo: Consider the role of memory, prophecy, superstition, and maternity in this story. Compare its Ghanaian landscape with that of rural Botswana as presented by Head and rural South Africa as presented by Wicomb. Emecheta: Consider the effect of diaspora on this Nigerian woman and her family. What conflicts emerge in their new environment, and why? Week 6: Read introduction to Caribbean Women’s Writing, ed. Selwyn R. Cudjoe (handout) and Michelle Cliff, “If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire.”

CARIBBEAN WOMEN’S WRITING

Week 6 Cliff: Consider how the metaphor of fire works in this essay. What conflicts of identity and consciousness does the narrator experience? How does this polemic shed light on Emecheta’s diasporic consciousness? How does Cudjoe’s overview of Caribbean women’s literature enhance your understanding of Cliff’s essay? For Week 7: Read Alcoff, “Cultural Feminism versus Poststructuralism” (handout), Dionne Brand’s “Madame Alaird’s Breasts,” and Jamaica Kincaid’s “Xuela.”

Week 7 Alcoff: How does her discussion of identity and difference as feminist theoretical concepts illuminate your understanding of these themes in Brand’s and Kincaid’s writing? Compare her views on feminism and postmodernism with those of Wicomb in her theoretical essay. Brand: Consider how girls’ emerging sexuality is presented in Brand’s story. To what extent is the writer’s postcolonial and diasporic identity inscribed in her text? Kincaid: What issues of identity and difference surface in “Xuela”? How would you describe the narrator’s “politics of location” in this story? For Week 8: Read Danticat’s Breath, Eyes, Memory.

Week 8 Danticat: What effect does her migration from Haiti to the U.S. have on the protagonist in Breath, Eyes, Memory? Consider issues of mother love, cultural dislocation, and diasporic consciousness. How is she affected by her return to Haiti? Discuss also the significance of Danticat’s title as it relates to themes of postcoloniality and embodiment. For Week 9: Read poems by
Oodgeroo of the tribe Noonuccal and Judith Wright (poems from the anthology and additional handouts) and Keri Hulme’s “One Whale, Singing.”

WRITING BY AUSTRALIAN AND NEW ZEALAND WOMEN

Week 9 Oodgeroo and Wright: Who and what are mourned in these poems? How do the writers link memory, political consciousness, and resistance? Hulme: Analyze the attitude toward maternity in Hulme’s story, from the point of view of the unnamed protagonist as well as the whale herself. What view of nature and the environment does Hulme’s story raise? For Weeks 10 and 11: Read Keri Hulme, The Bone People.

Weeks 10 and 11 The Bone People: Analyze the complex relationships formed by Kerewin, Joe, and Simon, and consider how each is affected by cultural as well as individual problems of identity. What aspects of contemporary Maori urban life and Maori spirituality do you find most compelling, and why? What role do violence and healing play in the novel? For Week 12: Read Bharati Mukherjee’s “A Wife’s Story” and Anita Desai’s “Surface Textures”; read Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (handout).

INDIAN WOMEN’S WRITING

Week 12 Mukherjee: What issues of gendered and cultural dislocation does Mukherjee’s protagonist grapple with? How does Mukherjee use irony and humor in her presentation of diaspora? Desai: Why is Harish received in the rural village as a god? Use Spivak’s theoretical essay as a lens through which to interpret “Surface Textures.” For Weeks 13 and 14: Read Desai’s Journey to Ithaca.

Weeks 13 and 14 Desai: What do the characters’ experiences reveal about gender identity in India and about diasporic consciousness? Again, use Spivak’s insights as a means of “reading” this novel’s perspective on postcolonialism.

Commentary on “Gender and Postcolonialism”

This course offers students access to literature and theory by women across cultures and highlights the global nature of The Longman Anthology of Women’s Literature. It invites students to consider connections between postcolonial and feminist theory and to compare literary works by writers from the same country or culture. I focus on Africa, the Caribbean, Australia/New Zealand, and India because they provide important and diverse sites for examining gender and postcolonialism, and because the anthology lends itself well to a study of these cultures. Starting the class with essays by Mohanty and Rich orients students to several keywords whose meanings are pivotal to the course: writing, memory, consciousness, resistance, and politics of location. Since my assumption is that most of the theoretical concepts, writers, literary texts, and cultures represented here will introduce new knowledge to U.S. college students, I like to encourage even more collaboration than I do in other
women’s literature classes. For this reason I typically set up a list-serve to allow students to communicate often and instantaneously with each other about the texts they are studying. I usually read the list-serve discussion before each class and try to incorporate into the next class any compelling questions, concerns, and ideas that have emerged—either by including them in my opening remarks or by asking students involved in the on-line discussion to “replay” that discussion for those who did not participate, and analyze any debates or questions that their dialogue raised which they want the entire group to consider.

To make the syllabus itself a source of new knowledge, I include in the course overview quotations from Mohanty and Rich and offer focal questions for each class that can serve either as journal topics or as topics for class discussion (or both). Some of the questions are thematic, others theoretical; still others emphasize genre or narrative, poetic, or prose technique. Dividing the class according to geographic regions is one of many possible methods of organization, the most obvious other being to use the thematic categories into which the anthology is divided. I like the geographic approach because it allows me to introduce students to the countries and cultural contexts from which the selected women write. In cases in which more than one writer from a country is represented, this method also allows students to see the diversity of women’s voices from that place.

Many of the writers included on this syllabus are novelists, and this course permits professors to make their own choices as to which novels to assign. I have chosen novels by Hulme and Desai because they teach well and present issues of postcolonialism powerfully. In addition, since the publisher of The Longman Anthology of Women’s Literature, Addison Wesley Longman, has an agreement with Penguin to offer discounts on Penguin novels ordered for class use along with the anthology, The Bone People and Journey to Ithaca can be ordered at a discount price. Danticat’s lyrical novel introduces literature from Haiti, a country not represented in the anthology, and addresses themes of mother-daughter relationships, eating disorders, postcolonialism, and diaspora.

The readings from South Africa under “African Women’s Writing” reveal different writers’ strategies for representing apartheid in literature and thereby undermining it through linguistic resistance. Having students read the introduction to Section V of the anthology might be helpful here. Works by Head, Aidoo, and Emecheta focus not so much on resistance as on community, memory, and diaspora. The readings by African and Caribbean women are linked by their attention to themes of identity and difference as well as memory and nostalgia; the introduction to Section IV might be useful supplementary reading here. The literature by Aboriginal and Maori women brings together memory, political consciousness, and resistance. Please see the chapter of this manual on “Teaching Difficult Material” for a discussion of background information on each culture. The biographical headnotes for each author in the anthology also provide valuable information.
ETHNIC LITERATURE BY U.S. WOMEN

COURSE OVERVIEW: This course will focus on literature by Native American, Latina, Asian American, and African American women. Although we will examine writing from various time periods, our main emphasis will be twentieth-century literature. Our goals are to explore how issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and class intersect in writing by racial ethnic women in the United States, and to consider thematic and stylistic points of contact and divergence in their literary texts. In addition, we will read feminist critical essays and scholarly essays on comparative ethnicities, including selections from Comparative American Identities (ed. Hortense Spillers, 1991) and Women Poets of the Americas (ed. Jacqueline Vaught Brogan and Cordelia Chavez Candelaria, 1999).

TEXTS: The Longman Anthology of Women’s Literature, ed. Mary K. DeShazer
Maxine Hong Kingston, The Woman Warrior
A packet of critical and theoretical essays

REQUIREMENTS: Participation in an online chatroom, using the anthology website (www.ablongman.com/deshazer), a twelve-page midterm paper, several individual presentations, and a final group project.

CLASS SCHEDULE


WRITING BY NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN

Week 2 Allen: “Who Is Your Mother?”: What constitutes Native American feminist thought, according to Allen? Compare the environmental values and trickster motifs that she ascribes to America’s indigenous people with those revealed in Zitkala-Sä’s narrative. For Week 3: Read Louise Erdrich, “Fleur,” and poems by Joy Harjo.


WRITING BY LATINAS
Week 4 Anzaldúa: What key issues of concern to Third World women writers does Anzaldúa raise? How and why does she present writing as a source of conflict as well as celebration? Moraga: Compare Moraga’s autobiographical description of her struggles as a Chicana writer with that of Anzaldúa. For Week 5: Read poems by Moraga and Cisneros, essay by Candelaria on Chicano poetry.

Week 5 Cisneros: How and why does Cisneros celebrate her sexual and ethnic identities in her poems? Moraga: Discuss maternal subjectivity, poverty, and reclamation as themes in Moraga’s elegiac poem. Consider how Cisneros and Moraga contribute to the conventions and traditions of Chicano poetry as described by Candelaria. For Week 6: Read Hisaye Yamamoto, “Seventeen Syllables,” and Maxine Hong Kingston, “No Name Woman.”

WRITING BY ASIAN-AMERICAN WOMEN

Week 6 Yamamoto: What links between “writing, memory, consciousness, and political resistance” do you find in this story? Analyze the mother-daughter relationship presented here, its conflicts and celebrations and what it reveals about gender and ethnic heritage. Kingston: Compare and contrast the “politics of location” experienced by Yamamoto’s Japanese protagonist and Kingston’s Chinese one. What points of contact do you see between the narrative voices in Yamamoto’s and Kingston’s stories? For Week 7: Read the rest of Kingston’s The Woman Warrior and Trinh T. Minh-ha, “Not You/Like You: Postcolonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference.”

Week 7 Trinh and Kingston: What insights into identity and difference as feminist theoretical constructs does Trinh offer? How does her theory shed light on these issues as they appear in Kingston’s The Woman Warrior? Consider issues of gender, ethnicity, and genre in Kingston’s book: why/how does it matter whether this is autobiography or fiction? For Week 8: Read Alice Walker, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” poems by Phillis Wheatley, and June Jordan’s essay on Wheatley. MIDTERM PAPER DUE.

WRITING BY AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN

Week 8 Walker: What artistic legacy does Walker think her mother and other black women artists passed on to her, and what rhetorical strategies does she use to pay homage to these women? What links does she make between art and spirituality? In what ways does she pay homage to Wheatley? Wheatley and Jordan: Consider what Wheatley’s poems reveal about her voice, authority, and authorship as an African-American woman, a writer, and a slave. What light on Wheatley’s work and life does Jordan’s essay shed? For Week 9: Read poems by Frances Harper, speeches by Sojourner Truth, and essay on Truth by Nell Irvin Painter.

Week 9 Harper: Discuss the intersection of poetry and polemic in Harper’s poetry. How are issues of abolitionism and literacy developed in the poems? Truth: Through what rhetorical strategies does Truth resist both sexism and
racism in her speeches? How effective do you think they would have been with white audiences, and why? Painter: What light does Painter’s essay shed on Truth as a feminist icon and on the historical context of her “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech? For Week 10: Read poems by Gwendolyn Brooks.

Week 10 Brooks: What attitude toward abortion does the speaker in “the mother” take, and how do you know? How does Brooks use the voice and consciousness of white and black mothers to condemn racist and sexist violence? Find information about the murder of Emmett Till in the library or on the web and use that information to analyze Brooks’ “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till.” For Week 11: Read “Uses of the Erotic” and poems by Audre Lorde, as well as essay on Lorde as icon by Anna Wilson (handout).


Week 13 Brant: Compare the maternal bereavement and cultural genocide experienced by the 1890s Native American mother with that experienced by the 1980s lesbian mother. How would you describe each mother’s sense of gender, cultural, and sexual dislocation? Brant, Dove, and Collins: Use Collins’ assessment of racial ethnic women’s motherwork, othermothering, and survival strategies to analyze Brant’s story and Dove’s poems about maternity.

Week 14: Group presentations of final projects—comparative American identities.

Commentary on “Ethnic Literature by U.S. Women”

I designed this course to focus on U.S. women of color, whose categories include Native American, Latina, Asian American, and African American women. Although this version of the course uses The Longman Anthology of Women’s Literature, one full-length work (Kingston’s The Woman Warrior), and a packet of handouts as core texts, it is easy to use the anthology alone if you prefer, incorporating additional writers from the anthology (e.g. bell hooks, Barbara Christian) and/or adding Jewish writers (Grace Aguilar, Anzia Yezierska, Adrienne Rich, Irena Klepfisz, etc.). Another possibility is to organize
the course according to the five conceptual themes around which the anthology is organized. My own preference is to examine literature by each racial-ethnic group as a distinct body of work during most of the course, then spend a two weeks at the end addressing comparative American ethnicities. I do this primarily because I find that it allows students to delve into each culture in some depth, and because I teach at a university that does not offer discreet courses in Native American literature, Chicano studies, etc. Each unit, therefore, amounts to a mini-course on women’s writing from each of the major U.S. racial ethnic groups.

For information about online chatrooms for women’s literature courses, consult the anthology website at www.ablongman.com/deshazer. The website also offers links that provide scholarly information on ethnic literatures by women as well as cultural and historical background on Native Americans, Latinas, Asian Americans, and African Americans.

INTRODUCTION TO WOMEN’S STUDIES

Course Description: This is an interdisciplinary course designed to introduce you to key topics in Women’s Studies. Among our focal concerns will be to critique patriarchal views of women; to explore the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality as interlocking forms of oppression and as potential sources of liberation; and to consider the place of feminist literature and theory in academic study. As a means of charting this territory, I have divided the course into sections on socialization, women’s health, identity, race and ethnicity, family relationships, etc. I invite you in join this class in probing the overarching question, how are women challenging forces of exclusion and envisioning a more just society?

Requirements: As a believer in feminist pedagogy, I consider this a class all of us are creating collectively. Therefore, I want to involve you in determining the nature of special projects and the criteria for deciding your final grade. I suggest the following assignments as conducive to building together a body of knowledge in Women’s Studies.

Weekly Journal: This might take the form of responses to or extended commentary on the assigned readings and the particular issues and questions they raise. Some students like to choose a quotation from the reading that stands out in their mind and discuss its meaning and relevance; others might choose questions from the “Intertextualities” sections in The Longman Anthology of Women’s Literature, one of your two texts. You might also include discussion of newspaper, magazine, and journal clippings related to our focal issues, or other topics, that you choose which will illuminate our discussions of gender/race/class/sexuality issues. In addition to sources that many students read, such as The New York Times, Newsweek, People, or your local paper, I encourage you to seek out feminist and progressive magazines (e.g. Ms, The Nation, The Progressive, Extra) and papers and scholarly journals that address women’s issues globally (e.g. Sojourner, The Christian Science
Monitor, Signs, NWSA Journal, Sage). Women’s studies websites can also be useful; more to come on these!

Final Research Paper: I hope this paper will grow out of your weekly journal and will be an in-depth analysis of an issue you commented on there. The project can be individual or collaborative and should cite at least ten scholarly sources. I ask that your paper be not merely a status report but a critical evaluation of a certain problem or issue confronting women in a particular society, and an analysis of possible solutions or next steps.

Class Presentations in Pairs or Groups: Part of what distinguishes a feminist classroom is its emphasis on alternatives to teacher-centered styles of learning. Throughout the semester, therefore, I invite you to lead class with others; sign-up sheets will be available, and I'm hoping that one class each week will be student-led. A handout of key points or a writing-activity sheet indicating the specific focus of your presentation will be helpful to your peers and to me.

Community Involvement: Groups or individuals may want to share their Women’s Studies knowledge with their communities in some form. Past students’ projects have included developing a campus feminist film festival, conducting an oral history project with a woman mentor, presenting short versions of final papers to local high school classes, and offering a Women’s Studies Conference on campus at the end of the semester, with a keynote speaker and with students from the class presenting their research to the public. You decide!

Grading: I will ask you as a class to negotiate these class requirements and to help me develop criteria for determining what percentage of your final grade each of the above assignments should represent. Also, I ask that you attend regularly, prepare conscientiously, and participate fairly and energetically in all discussions and activities.

Below are some women’s studies websites that you might find useful:

Dataline—The Glass Ceiling: http://cyberwerks.com:70/1s/dataline
PENet—Prostitutes Education Network: http://bayswan.org/penet.htm/
Coalition for Positive Sexuality: http://www.positive.org
Gender and Sexuality: http://eng.hss.cmu.edu/gender/
Women’s Educational Equity Act Resource Center: http://www.edc.org/WomensEquity/index.html
The Family Violence Prevention Fund: http://www.igc.org/fund
Feminist Majority Foundation: http://www.feminist.org/
Women’s Studies: Stereotypes and Expected Behaviors: http://www.socialstudies.com/mar/gender2.html
Women’s Studies Resources:
http://www.inform.umd.edu/EdRes/Topic/WomensStudies

Introduction to Women’s Studies Class Schedule

Texts: DeShazer, ed., The Longman Anthology of Women’s Literature (LA)
Jaggar and Rothenberg, eds., Feminist Frameworks, 3rd ed. (FF)

A packet of handouts

Hubbard, “The Political Nature of Human Nature” in FEMINIST
FRAMEWORKS (FF), 127–49.

Jan. 22 STUDENT-LED DISCUSSION of gender dynamics in Barnes, To the
Dogs and Glaspell, Trifles (LA).

Jan. 27 WOMEN’S HEALTH—Readings: “Abortion Proclamation” and “Aborting
Choice” in FF, 50–54; handouts: Delany et. al., from THE CURSE, Northrup
from WOMEN’S BODIES, WOMEN’S WISDOM; excerpt from OUR BODIES,
OUR SELVES—birth control.

Jan. 29 STUDENT-LED DISCUSSION of Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper,”
Memorial” (LA)

Feb. 3 FEMINIST HISTORY AND THEORY—Readings: Taylor and Whittier, “The
New Feminist Movement” (handout); Flax, “Women Do Theory,” Collins,
“Toward an Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology” in FF, 80–85, 93–103.

Feb. 5 STUDENT-LED DISCUSSION of readings: Woolf, A Room of One’s Own
(LA).

Feb. 10 IDENTITY AND WOMEN’S LITERATURE—Aptheker, “Tapestries of
Life,” in FF, 85–93; complete A Room of One’s Own (LA).

Feb. 12 STUDENT-LED DISCUSSION of poems about identity by Anne Finch,
Katherine Philips and Emily Dickinson, and Jamaica Kincaid, “Xuela” (LA).

Feb. 17 RACE, ETHNICITY, AND IDENTITY IN WOMEN’S LITERATURE—Phillis
Wheatley poems; Jordan, “The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America”
(LA); King, “Multiple Jeopardy,” FF, 220–30.

Feb. 19 STUDENT-LED DISCUSSION of Walker, “In Search of Our Mothers’
Gardens” (LA) and hooks, “Talking Back” (LA).

Feb. 24 IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE: Native American Writing—Zitkala-Sä
of White Feminism” and poems (LA).

Feb. 26 STUDENT-LED DISCUSSION of Rowlandson’s captivity narrative (LA).

Mar. 3 POSTCOLONIAL WOMEN’S WRITING, IDENTITY, AND
DIFFERENCE—Trinh, “Not You/Like You: Postcolonial Women and the
Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference” and Emecheta, “A Cold
Welcome” (LA).

Mar. 5 STUDENT-LED DISCUSSION of Cliff, “If I could Write This in Fire, I
Would Write This in Fire” and de Kok, “Small Passing” and “Our Sharpeville”
SPRING BREAK—ENJOY!!!


Mar. 19 Panelists discuss redefinitions of family


Apr. 21, 23, 28, 30 STUDENT PRESENTATIONS OF FINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Commentary on Course Syllabus for Introduction to Women’s Studies

This is an interdisciplinary course designed to introduce students to the field of women’s studies, to academic approaches to women’s issues, and to a rather open-ended type of feminist pedagogy. The syllabus contains a four-week unit on women’s literature that focuses on the topics of identity and difference, but it also uses writings by women as a springboard for students to explore such sociocultural issues as women’s health, violence against women, and international human rights. Taught along with The Longman Anthology of Women’s Literature is the third edition of Alison Jagger and Paula Rothenberg’s Feminist Frameworks, one of the most frequently used and valuable introductory texts for women’s studies.

Although I generally ask my students to complete all four of the class requirements—the journal, research paper, class presentations, and
community involvement—in some way, I spend part of one early class and some time in later classes inviting students to decide together just how they want to undertake these assignments, and how they want each to be evaluated. One goal here is to help students claim their own education and see women’s studies as not only an academic area of inquiry, but also a process that models collaborative sharing of knowledge and decision-making. Another goal is to de-center (though not destroy!) the teacher’s authority in the classroom. Not every teacher, of course, will be comfortable with this approach, and these requirements can certainly be varied or made less negotiable. In my own classes students have interpreted these assignments differently: one group decided, for example, to focus only on the assigned texts in their journals, and not include relevant newspaper articles, but this same group chose to do two community projects, a film festival with student-led panels after each showing, and research presentations to sophomore social studies students at an area high school. The final paper is the least negotiable assignment, but again it can be variously interpreted; some students prefer to do group research projects rather than individual ones, or multimedia projects rather than papers, and these alternative assignments often lead to exciting collaborative learning.

I begin the course with gender socialization and women’s health because these two areas of study raise issues that hit young women and men where they live, inviting them to consider what it means to be male or female, what stereotypes are associated with each sex, and what difference contraception, abortion rights, and sexual and emotional wellbeing have on their daily experience. Women’s literature can provide an excellent way into some of these discussions—e.g. Barnes’ play To the Dogs shows a woman and a man at what some students will consider a gendered stalemate; Gilman’s story “The Yellow Wallpaper” will spark student interest in the days in which post-partum women were provided with needless “rest cures” that in fact made many sicker; and poems about abortion by Sexton and Brooks can direct discussion of that controversial subject away from a polarizing “for or against” approach to a focus on textual representations of complex positions. Likewise, assigning parts or all of Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own can help students to become acquainted with feminist theory that is playful and argumentative; it can be taught well alongside recent feminist theoretical essays such as those by Flax and Collins in Feminist Frameworks, which some students might find difficult or dry.

The classes of Feb. 10–March 5 comprise a four-week unit on women’s literature that is built around four related topics: identity and women’s literature, race and ethnicity, identity and difference, and postcolonialism. This unit once again integrates feminist theory and women’s writing and draws especially on Sections IV and V of the anthology, whose introductory essays students might find helpful as they grapple with these topics. Global women’s literature from The Longman Anthology is also included in the reading assignments for the last weeks’ discussions of violence and human rights.
Usually the first class of each week consists of a mini-lecture to introduce the focal subject, assigned readings, and relevant theoretical or literary concepts for the week, as well as a discussion of the readings that the teacher facilitates. Students lead the second class of each week in pairs or small groups, and they sign up early in the semester for the week they wish to lead, based on interest. Since many of the literary texts are assigned for the student-led classes, it is worthwhile on the first day of class to introduce students to effective strategies for facilitating class discussion of literature. For example, they might prepare a one-page handout indicating the work’s key themes and most notable stylistic features, assign ahead of class study questions that link the literature to the assigned theoretical readings from the preceding class, and develop sample exercises for small group, role playing, and in-class writing. I encourage pairs or groups to meet at least twice outside of class to prepare their presentations, and I am available to meet with any group that has questions or needs assistance. Usually I turn half of the class over to the student leaders on Thursdays. I also bring in at least one panel of faculty or community members to discuss a topic—in this case, redefinitions of the family in the late 1990s.

TESTING AND EVALUATION

As is evident from the syllabi included above, my own pedagogy does not include testing in any traditional form. I believe that in classes that emphasize active class participation and require a reading journal, an instructor can usually tell which students are not doing the reading or are analyzing texts without accuracy or sufficient depth. In addition, I prefer to concentrate on helping students improve their writing and critical thinking skills by removing the pressure that can accrue when they are concentrating on whether or not a topic will be included on the midterm. However, I am aware that many other teachers of women’s literature prefer to give in-class or take-home exams as a means of evaluating their students’ work. As one feminist professor who favors testing asked me, “How else do you judge whether students have read the material assigned for class discussion? How can you tell whether students have processed and retained important aspects of course content?”

Since I have given exams in the past and have no philosophical objection to other instructors’ doing so, I have taken my colleague’s questions to heart and included below a sample midterm exam for Introduction to Women’s Studies. This exam is designed to accompany the course syllabus on pages 105–110 of this manual. I have chosen essay and short answer questions designed to evaluate students’ comprehension of course assignments, an approach that I find more useful than true-false or multiple choice questions, which I do not view as sufficiently open-ended for feminist pedagogy. In addition, I give students choices in each section of the exam, to allow for their different interests and emphases and to give me variety as I read their papers. I would count the more comprehensive essay questions as two-thirds of a student’s grade and the short answer questions as one-third, although this emphasis may vary from teacher to teacher.
I would add that for courses in women’s literature, the study questions included in this manual as well as the questions offered in the anthology under “Intertextualities” can work nicely on exams, should you wish to use them in this way.

Final Exam—Introduction to Women’s Studies

Essay Section: Choose TWO of these questions and write essays of approximately three pages, referring as often as you can to specific examples from the assigned texts.

1. In “Women Do Theory” Jane Flax emphasizes three areas of knowledge as particularly critical for feminist thinkers to investigate: production, reproduction, and the “psychodynamic” sphere. Analyze Virginia Woolf’s feminist theoretical approach to each of these areas in A Room of One’s Own. How effectively and on what terms does she address each of these topics?

2. How would you compare and contrast the treatment of abortion as a feminist issue in the following texts: NOW’s “Abortion Proclamation,” Gwendolyn Brooks’ “the mother,” and Anne Sexton’s “The Abortion”? Consider each text through the particular feminist lens (liberal, radical, or multicultural) that you consider most appropriate to its content and tone, and explain your choice of lens.

3. In “Not You/Like You: Postcolonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference,” Trinh T. Minh-ha assesses the various ways in which feminist writers process claims about selfhood and align with other women across differences. Define the terms “identity” and “difference,” using Trinh’s approach to these concepts as a point of departure; then analyze how the conceptual theme of identity and difference manifests itself in EITHER Ingrid de Kok’s poem “Small Passing” or Jamaica Kincaid’s story “Xuela.”

Short Answer Section: Choose FOUR of these five questions to answer in a substantial paragraph.

1. Does the narrator in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” ultimately lose her sanity, gain it, or do neither? Explain your reasoning.

2. What stance toward asserting a strong identity as a writer and woman does Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea take in her poem “The Introduction”?

3. In what variety of ways does Katherine Philips approach the topic of friendship between women in the poems you read?

4. What does June Jordan find miraculous about the poetry of Phillis Wheatley, and why does Jordan write a sonnet in honor of this poet?

5. In Buchi Emecheta’s “A Cold Welcome” from Second-Class Citizen, what marital problems affect Adah most severely, and how effectively does she ultimately cope with these difficulties?

ADDITIONAL THEMATIC TABLES OF CONTENTS
The Longman Anthology of Women’s Literature contains six alternate tables of contents: a historical chronology of writers and five thematic TOCs—Women and the Sacred, Coming of Age, Women and Aging, Gender and Postcolonialism, and U.S. Ethnic Writers. Below I offer three additional thematic TOCs—Family Dynamics, Education and Work, and Love and Marriage—and a brief commentary on each. The authors are listed in chronological order for the convenience of those who wish to develop historically based courses or units.

Family Dynamics

In this table of contents I have included works by thirty writers that address the anger, ambivalence, and affirmation that can occur between family members. Because the anthology includes a thematic section on mother-child dynamics, and because relationships between sexual partners appear in the TOC on love and marriage, I have concentrated here on selections that represent a wider range of familial relationships. Fathers and daughter issues, brother-sister bonds, connections between sisters, household dynamics, and extended family webs occur in the works listed below. Families constitute a primary source of love and nourishment, on the one hand, and pain and oppression on the other; they contribute meaningfully to every individual’s identity and socialization. For these reasons the topic of family dynamics resonates powerfully with most students of women’s literature and women’s studies.

Dorothy Leigh, from The Mother’s Blessing
Delarivier Manley, from The New Atlantis
Eliza Haywood, from The Female Spectator
Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey
Harriet Jacobs, from Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself
Grace Aguilar, from The Exodus—Laws for the Mothers of Israel
Kate Chopin, The Awakening
Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper”
Katherine Mansfield, “The Doll’s House”
Zora Neale Hurston, from Dust Tracks on a Road
Eudora Welty, “Why I Live at the P.O.”
Tillie Olsen, Tell Me A Riddle
Gwendolyn Brooks, “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, A Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon”
Hisaye Yamamoto, “Seventeen Syllables”
Nadine Gordimer, “Amnesty”
Audre Lorde, “Chain”
Bessie Head, “The Village Saint”
Bharati Mukherjee, “A Wife’s Story”
Margaret Atwood, “Giving Birth”
Toni Cade Bambara, “My Man Bovanne”
Maxine Hong Kingston, “No Name Woman”
Beth Brant, “A Long Story”
Ama Ata Aidoo, “A Gift from Somewhere”
Nancy Mairs, “Reading Houses, Writing Lives: The French Connection”  
Jamaica Kincaid, “Xuela”  
Margit Stange, “Personal Property: Exchange Value and the Female Self in The Awakening”  
Zoë Wicomb, “Bowl Like Hole”  
Cherrie Moraga, “La Guera”  
bell hooks, “Talking Back”  
Gcina Mhlophe, “The Toilet”

Education and Work

This table of contents presents forty-seven writers whose literary texts address the topics of education for women and work inside and outside the home. Both literacy issues and the right to higher education appear in these writings, as do concerns about nursing infants, childcare and child development, professionalism, on-the-job experience, art and creativity, and the writer’s life. Because students in the twenty-first century often believe that women’s entrance into universities and the workplace was a twentieth-century phenomenon, they may be interested to see that women writing in English from the fifteenth century on have entered the discourse about education and professions for women. Crosscultural differences in women’s education and professional lives are also worthy of emphasis.

Juliana Berners, from The Book of Hunting  
Dorothy Leigh, from The Mother’s Blessing  
Elizabeth Clinton, from The Countess of Lincoln’s Nursery  
Anne Bradstreet, “The Author to Her Book”; “In Reference to Her Children”  
Margaret Cavendish, “The Poetess’s Hasty Resolution”; “The Poetess’s Petition”; “An Excuse for So Much Writ upon My Verses”; from To All Writing Ladies  
Anne Killigrew, “Upon the Saying that My Verses Were Made by Another”; “On a Picture Painted by Herself”  
Anne Finch, “The Introduction”; “The Answer”  
Mary Astell, from A Serious Proposal to the Ladies  
Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, “To Lady Bute”  
Frances Burney, from The Diary of Frances Burney  
Phillis Wheatley, “To S.M., A Young African Painter, On Seeing His Works”  
Mary Wollstonecraft, from A Vindication of the Rights of Woman  
Mary Hays, from An Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women  
Maria Edgeworth, from Letters for Literary Ladies  
Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey  
Mary Shelley, Introduction to Frankenstein  
Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman?”; “Keeping the Thing Going While Things Are Stirring”  
Margaret Fuller, from Woman in the Nineteenth Century  
George Eliot, “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists”
Emily Dickinson, poems 508 and 709
Rebecca Harding Davis, Life in the Iron-Mills
Alice Dunbar-Nelson, “I Sit and Sew”
Anzia Yezierska, “Soap and Water”
Virginia Woolf, A Room of One’s Own
Djuna Barnes, from Ladies Almanack
Stevie Smith, “My Muse”; “Thoughts about the Person from Porlock”
May Sarton, “Journey Toward Poetry”; “The Muse as Medusa”; “Of the Muse”
Muriel Rukeyser, “Kathe Kollwitz”
Ellen Kuzwayo, Nkosi Sikelel’i Afrika
Hisaye Yamamoto, “Seventeen Syllables”
Adrienne Rich, “Notes toward a Politics of Location”; “Diving into the Wreck”;
from Inscriptions
Toni Morrison, “Recitatif”
Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power”
June Jordan, “The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America or Something Like a for Phillis Wheatley”
Paula Gunn Allen, “Who Is Your Mother: Red Roots of White Feminism”
Nell Irvin Painter, “Arn’t I a Woman?”
Nancy Mairs, “Reading Houses, Writing Lives: The French Connection”
Shari Benstock, “The Lesbian Other”
Alice Walker, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens”
Michelle Cliff, “If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire”
Ingrid de Kok, “Our Sharpeville”
Louise Erdrich, “Fleur”
Carol Ann Duffy, “Standing Female Nude”

Love and Marriage

In this table of contents I have selected writings from a variety of time periods, cultures, and sexualities that address the themes of love and marriage. Most students find the topic of sexual relationships intriguing, and they respond well to an assignment that invites them, for example, to compare the treatment of this theme in poems by Anne Sexton and Sharon Olds, or in a seventeenth-century play by Aphra Behn and a twentieth-century play by Djuna Barnes. They also find it fascinating to analyze the differing representations of marriage in short stories by an Indian writer (Bharati Mukherjee), a Nigerian writer (Buchi Emecheta), and a writer from New Zealand (Keri Hulme). Finding common ground in works about passion by writers of different sexual orientations can also be enlightening; I sometimes ask students to compare Audre Lorde’s erotic imagery to Joy Harjo’s, or Mary Wroth’s to Edna St. Vincent Millay’s.

Anonymous, “The Wife’s Lament”
Anonymous, “Wulf and Eadwacer”
Margery Brews Paston, “Letters to her Valentine/fiance”; “Letter to John Paston”
Elizabeth I, “On Monsieur’s Departure”
Mary Wroth, from Pamphilia to Amphilanthus
Aphra Behn, The Lucky Chance
Eliza Haywood, from The Female Spectator
Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey
Emily Bronté, “R. Alcona to J. Brensaida”
Christina Rossetti, Monna Innominata
Kate Chopin, The Awakening
Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper”
Edith Wharton, “A Journey”
Susan Glaspell, Trifles
H.D., “Eurydice”
Djuna Barnes, from Ladies Almanack; To the Dogs
Edna St. Vincent Millay, from Fatal Interview
Tillie Olsen, Tell Me A Riddle
Gwendolyn Brooks, “A Bronzville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon”
Hisaye Yamamoto, “Seventeen Syllables”
Nadine Gordimer, “Amnesty”
Anne Sexton, “For My Lover, Returning to His Wife”
Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power”; “Love Poem”
Bharati Mukherjee, “A Wife’s Story”
Beth Brant, “A Long Story”
Ama Ata Aidoo, “A Gift from Somewhere”
Sharon Olds, “Sex Without Love”
Buchi Emecheta, “A Cold Welcome”
Keri Hulme, “One Whale, Singing”
Joy Harjo, “Fire”; “City of Fire; “Heartshed”
Kate Daniels, “Genesis I: 28”
Sandra Cisneros, “I the Woman”; “Love Poem #1”
Carol Ann Duffy, “Mrs. Aesop”
Jackie Kay, “Close Shave”; “Other Lovers”

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT ASSIGNMENT

For this 6–8 page paper, I ask that you conduct one or more informal interviews with a woman who has inspired or enhanced your life. This woman could be a family member, a teacher, a co-worker, a minister or counselor, a friend. Your interview(s) could be conducted in one sitting or in several visits, with or without the assistance of a tape recorder, or by phone or email if necessary. If you wish, you could interview two different women and compare and contrast their life stories and responses.

The purpose of this assignment is to learn and write about the diversity of women’s lives, their pleasures and crises, dreams and disappointments. As a
focus for your interviews, I hope you will consider asking these (or similar) questions related to breaking silence and finding voice, living in a female body, resistance and transformation:

1. When you were growing up, how easy or difficult did you find it to express your own views about the world and be heard? Who listened and who didn’t? What roles did silence play in your life? What about as a grown woman—how did you find your voice?

2. As an adolescent, how comfortable were you with the changes taking place in your body, and with whom did you discuss them? Of the many bodily experiences that women have—our first menstrual periods, our first sexual experience, pregnancy, childbirth, menopause, etc.—which stands out as most powerful in your mind, and why?

3. In your life as a woman, on what occasions have you resisted something you felt was inappropriate, unjust, or wrong? What form did your resistance take, and how did it affect others and yourself? What effect, if any, have the women’s movement and the civil rights movement had on your life and the life of women important to you?

The most effective interview is one in which you don’t simply read questions such as these but ask them over conversation, in your own words and in whatever order seems natural. Please remember that in a women’s studies approach to oral histories, the person interviewed is not the "object" of your research but its subject and your collaborator, someone from whom you are seeking respectfully to learn—about her life and your own.

The paper you write should be, therefore, not a transcription of your interview but a distillation of its highlights. Although most of the language in which you write should be your own, please quote occasionally from the person(s) you interview so that her/their voice will also be heard. Feel free to adapt the format as you wish, but please try to cover all three of the suggested question areas in your paper. If you wish to use a three-part structure, with each topic as a separate sub-heading, you may do so. Please be sure the paper is clear and well organized and that you proofread it for errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc. The paper should be typed and double spaced and should indicate the person whom you interviewed (by name or, if you wish, by relationship) and the date(s) and place(s) at which the interview(s) took place. In your final paragraph, please tell what you have learned from doing this assignment.

If you have questions or concerns about the paper, or if you just want to share or brainstorm ideas, please see me. I ask that you submit the paper on Feb. 26 and that you prepare a 5–7 minute discussion of your paper to share with the class on Feb. 24 and 26. That way we can provide inspiration for one another!