A History of Women’s Voices in America

This intermediate-level seminar will take a long view of women’s voices in North America, from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, as these voices emerged in private letters and journals, autobiographies, poetry, short stories and novels, essays, addresses, and prescriptive literature. We will explore the content and form of the writing from a historical perspective, determining women’s expectations, reactions and responses to the opportunities and “boundaries” of their lives (roles, status, domain) as these were defined by the particular era—and society—in which they lived. The syllabus follows a basic chronological organization; within that framework, the readings are organized by topic. We will examine a selection of readings each week, comparing the issues women addressed, the questions they asked, the assumptions they made, and their particular perspectives. In most weeks, an essay from the secondary literature on the subject will accompany the primary readings, providing a—but not the only—historical framework for considering the women’s voices.

Course requirements: The course consists of two meetings each week. All of the reading assignments for each class should be completed by that class meeting. You are expected to attend all meetings of the seminar and to arrive prepared to participate in a discussion and analysis the assigned readings [35% of final grade]. The History/GWS 249 Reading Guide on Blackboard provides questions to help you focus your reading for the class discussions, so that you can make the most efficient use of your time. If you miss a class, you are expected to write an informal (ungraded), but thoughtful discussion (2-3 pages) of the assigned readings for that class. All reading assignments are available on e-reserve through the Library Reserves link on Blackboard or by link to an online source or database from the Reading Guide on Blackboard. You are encouraged to purchase the assigned texts from the bookstore (a copy of each of the assigned books is on reserve in the library).

During the first half of the course, students will write three short (3-4 pages) essays on three of the assigned primary texts [10% each]. During the second half of the course, students will design and pursue research projects that focus on some aspect of women’s experience in North America, using women’s voices—primary texts written by women—as the primary sources for the project, in conjunction with secondary sources which will help you locate your study in the broader historiographical literature. A research paper (12-15 pages) will be due on or before the scheduled final exam date for the course [35% of final grade].

All students are expected to read, understand, and abide by the rules of citation outlined in Sources: Their Use and Acknowledgement (Dartmouth College, 1998) and by the Bowdoin College Academic Honor Code.

Alice Walker, Meridian (1976)
Maxine Hong Kingston, Woman Warrior (1976)
Mary Crow Dog (with Richard Erdoes), Lakota Woman (1990; reissued 1994)

Online Resources: on Blackboard Academic Suite at http://blackboard.bowdoin.edu/ or at http://www.bowdoin.edu/faculty/s/smcmahon/courses/hist249/index.shtml
1. 1/21 INTRODUCTION

1/23 READING WOMEN’S VOICES: “Reading as a Woman”
texts: Charles and Mary Lamb, Preface, Tales from Shakespeare (New York, 1806).
Women’s Voices: Instructions for Writing the Short Essays (Link)

2. 1/28 EARLY VOICES
essay: Mary Beth Norton, “Evolution of White Women’s Experience in Early America,”
American Historical Review 89.3 (June 1984): 593-619. (JSTOR)
texts: Anne Bradstreet (c.1612-1672), Selected poems. Representative Poetry On-line,
Department of English, University of Toronto (2003): 1,4,7,8,9,10,11. Note: There is a short biography of Anne Bradstreet (“Notes on Life and Works”) following the Index to Poems.

1/30 EARLY VOICES: Travel Narratives
texts: Mary Rowlandson (c.1635-1678), The Sovereignty and Goodness of God, Together with the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed, Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, (Boston, 1682).
Note: scroll through “The Small Print” until you get to the narrative.
Sarah Kemble Knight (1666-1727), The Journal of Madam Knight (1704), read the entries for Oct. 2 to Dec. 21, 1704; Dec. 24, 1704 to the end.

3. 2/4 WOMEN’S READING ANDWRITING DURING THE REVOLUTION AND THE EARLY REPUBLIC
Abigail to John, 31 March—5 April 1776; John to Abigail, 14 April 1776; Abigail to John, 14 April 1776; Abigail to John, 7-9 May 1776; John to Abigail, 22 May 1776; John to Abigail, 27 May 1776.

2/6 WRITING A RESEARCH PAPER IN HISTORY
readings: Bowdoin College Academic Honor Code (Link)
Guidelines for writing a Research Paper Prospectus: History/GWS 249 (Link)

4. 2/11 MASQUERADE: An Eighteenth-century “Best Selling” Novel as History
texts: Hannah Foster (1758-1840), The Coquette, or The History of Eliza Wharton; A Novel; Founded on Fact (1797).
The Declaration of Independence (1776).
2/13  SLAVE WOMEN: A Radically Different Degree of Unfreedom

effects: Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African-American Women’s History and the
Metalanguage of Race,” Signs (Winter 1992), 251-274. (ACADEMIC SEARCH PREMIER)

Jean Fagan Yellin, “Preface,” “Introduction,” “Chronology,” and “Correspondence,” in
Harriet A. Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself (1861; edited and with an introduction by Jean Fagan Yellin 2000), vii-xli, 245-

273.

text: Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman?” (1851). Reprinted in Sandra M. Gilbert and
Susan Gubar, The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women (NALW), 252-
3, or online link.

5.  2/18  LIBRARY TOUR: Meet in Hawthorne-Longfellow at Bookhenge

2/20  AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN: From Slavery to Freedom

text: Harriet A. Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself (1861;

6.  2/25  FILM: “Mary Silliman’s War”

2/27  FILM: “A Midwife’s Tale”

Research paper prospectus due: February 29

7.  3/3  LOCAL COLOR FICTION AND THE “REALITY” OF WOMEN’S LIVES

essay: Linda Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of

texts: Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888), “Transcendental Wild Oats” (1873), a newspaper
sketch reprinted in Silver Pitchers (1873).
Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1909).
Kate Chopin (1851-1904), “The Story of an Hour” (1894).
Mary Wilkins Freeman (1852-1930), “The Revolt of Mother,” Harper’s Monthly
(September 1890), reprinted in A New England Nun and other Stories (1891).
Magazine (January 1892).
Willa Cather (1873-1947).

Note: see the Reading Guide for instructions on selecting short stories to read.

3/5  MID-NINETEENTH-CENTURY REALIST FICTION

1861).
8. 3/24 AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN MID-TWENTIETH-CENTURY WHITE AMERICA
   essay: Cynthia Griggs Fleming, “More than a Lady”: Ruby Doris Smith Robinson and Black
   Women’s Leadership in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee,”
   Journal of Women’s History 4:3 (1993), 64-82. (Academic Search Premier)
   text: Alice Walker, Meridian (1976), Meridian: “The Last Return” through “The Attainment
   of Good.”
   recommended text: Zora Neale Hurston, “Sweat” (1926) and “How it Feels to be Colored
   Me” (1928), in NALW, pp. 1637-1653.

3/26 WOMEN AND CIVIL RIGHTS
   text: Walker, Meridian (1976), finish.

9. 3/31 INDIVIDUAL RESEARCH PAPER CONFERENCES

4/2 INDIVIDUAL RESEARCH PAPER CONFERENCES

10. 4/7 ASIAN AMERICAN IMMIGRANT WOMEN
    essay: Judy Yung, Chapter 3: “First Steps: The Second Generation, 1920s,” Unbound Feet: A
    text: Maxine Hong Kingston, The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among
    Ghosts (1976), “No Name Woman,” “White Tigers.”

4/9 CHINESE AMERICAN DAUGHTERS

11. 4/14 RESEARCH PAPERS: Interim reports

    Introduction and first section of research paper due: April 18

4/16 NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN
    Feminine Identity,” American Indian Culture and Research Journal 12.1
    (1988), 565-586. (e-reserve)
    (1-72).

12. 4/21 NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN AND POLITICS
4/23 JEWISH IMMIGRANT WOMEN


*Note:* read the 1994 Foreword at the end of the book, as an Afterword. Part I:  “Wasn’t I Once Also a Daughter?”

recommended texts: Anzia Yezierska, “The Fat of the Land” (1920), *NALW*, pp. 1423-1442


13. 4/28 JEWISH MOTHERS AND JEWISH DAUGHTERS


4/30 WORK-IN-PROGRESS REPORTS

14. 5/5 WORK-IN-PROGRESS REPORTS

5/7 WOMEN WRITING WOMEN’S LIVES: “When the hope for closure is abandoned ....” (Carolyn Heilbrun)

*Research papers due:* Saturday, May 17, 5:00 pm