

AH205 The Black female figure in Western Art: 17th century to Present: From Object to Subject

Seminar Leader: Prof. Enuma Okoro

Course Times: Mondays 14:00 – 17:15 (Select Saturday offsite visits will replace select Monday classes, see syllabus)

Email: e.okoro@berlin.bard.edu

Office Hours: by email appointment

Course Description

The course examines the representation of the Black female figure in Western art from the 17th century to the present. With considerations of historical contexts, visual literacy and how representation of race and gender shape and influence the development of art, visual culture, and cultural narratives, this course will analyze a selection of art works and how these portrayals reflect and influence agency, societal attitudes and cultural narratives at the time of production. Students will also consider the impact of such works on art and society in the ensuing years and generations. In addition to research and reports, students will be expected to read and synthesize perspectives from art history, feminist theory and cultural studies to assess cultural narratives. Students should also be prepared to engage in creative reflection, writing and class presentation as part of the investigation and consideration of these art works. Museum visits, where possible, will be part of the course.

Requirements

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Accommodations

Bard College Berlin is committed to inclusion and providing equal access to all students; we uphold and maintain all aspects of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 3 of the German Disability Equality Act of April 27, 2002 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1468). If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, Atticus Kleen, (accommodations@berlin.bard.edu) to request an official accommodation.

Requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible to ensure adequate time for coordination and planning. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and may require advance notice to implement.

If you have already been approved for accommodations with the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, please arrange to meet with me outside of class so that we can develop an implementation plan.

Students may face extenuating circumstances related to various personal or external factors, which impact their academic performance. While these circumstances often do not fall within the legal framework of Disability Accommodations, Bard College Berlin is committed to supporting students experiencing such circumstances. A student needing a short extension or a replacement assignment because of an extenuating circumstance is encouraged to make arrangements directly with instructors if possible. If further support is needed, please visit the [Bard College Berlin Accessibility page](#). Questions about this process can be directed to James Harker (j.harker@berlin.bard.edu) or Maria Anderson-Long (m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu).

Attendance

Attendance at ALL classes is expected and is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, more than two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) WILL AFFECT the participation grade. Please also be on time to all classes and off campus visits. Any unavoidable absence beyond one in our once-per-week course will require an email sent Please send a notification before class, via email for any unavoidable absence, stating why this absence is necessary. All students will be responsible for making sure they are caught up on class lectures or assignments missed in their absence.

Any unexcused absences will affect the participation grade for the course. Remote participation in any class session is not permitted under any circumstance.

For off-campus visits. Students are responsible for their transportation to and from the site-visit. Please ensure punctual arrivals and if it is a museum visit ensure you arrive with plenty of time to secure your coats and bags in museum lockers before class begins. Students will stay with the class group at all times during these off site visits

Bard College Berlin may not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Assessment

- Attendance and Punctuality
- Respect of classmates and overall class community
- Reading assignments before class and bringing hard copy of assignments to class
- Class participation: active listening, contributing productively to discussion
- Conduct during off-campus visits
- Two essays
- One presentation which includes a visual analysis of a selected painting.

Use of Electronics

To facilitate a focused and engaging seminar discussion, and out of respect for the class community, no class audio or video recording is permitted. No social media posts from class sessions. The use of electronic devices, including smart phones, and notebooks during class time or during off-campus site visits is not allowed, unless for disability accommodation. If you have a disability accommodation, please inform your instructor at the beginning of the semester.

Assignments

Both essays should include footnotes / references, list of illustrations and bibliography.

Structure of essays and general guidelines will be discussed in class.

- A 2000 word midterm essay is due by midnight on **Friday, October 17, 2025**
- A 2500 word final essay is due at midnight on **December 8, 2025**
- Individual Student Presentation: Students will select a painting (discussed first in individual meetings with the professor) and give a presentation which will include a visual analysis with historical and social context. These presentations will be discussed more on the first day of class and students will have the opportunity to sign up for presentation dates. Presentations will be on after midterm break.

For the student presentations, students might find it helpful to read the following chapters in the book on reserve in the library:

Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*, 5th edition pp. 1-11, 13-44.

Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*, 5th edition pp. 46-69 (A Critical Visual Methodology)

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late.

Where a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed upon by both parties. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion.

Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

The grade breakdown for this seminar will be as follows:

Final essay (2500 words): 40%

Midterm essay (2000 words): 20%

Presentation 20%

Participation (including class attendance, completed assigned readings and participation in class discussions) 20%

Essay Deadlines

- A 2000 word Midterm essay is due by midnight on Friday, October 17, 2025
- A 2500 word final essay is due at midnight on Monday, December 8, 2025

Schedule

This class will be heavy on reading, class discussion and looking at art.

Please purchase the following book:

bell hooks, "Art on My Mind", Visual Politics, 1995 – **Finish reading this book by Monday October 27, 2025.**

The three other books from which class readings are assigned will be on reserve in the library for readings. These books cannot be checked out of the library to ensure they are made available to everyone.

Students of course, have the option of choosing to purchase their own individual copies of the books from which class readings are assigned. All the books are available on Amazon besides the book T.F Earle and K.J.P Lowe "*Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*" by Cambridge University Press, paperback edition 2010

One of the readings for October 27, 2025, - Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity, 1992, 1994, is available to read online.

September 1 (Reading 37 pages)

Stuart Hall, Sean Nixon, and Jessica Evans, "The Work of Representation" (Chapter 2, pp. 11-32. This includes "Reading A" on pp 62-64 in the book "Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices" 3rd edition, Sage 2024)

T.F Earle and K.J.P Lowe "*Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*" Notes on the text, Introduction pp. 1-14

September 8 (Reading 38 pages)

Stuart Hall, Sean Nixon, and Jessica Evans, "The Work of Representation" (Chapter 2, pp. 32-60. This includes "Readings B, C, D, E, F" on pp 64-75 in the book "Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices" 3rd edition, Sage 2024)

September 15 (Reading 44 pages)

T.F Earle and K.J.P Lowe "*Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*" Chapter One 'The stereotyping of black Africans in Renaissance Europe' pp. 17-47

Stuart Hall, Sean Nixon, and Jessica Evans, "The Spectacle of the Other" - Chapter 4, Section 4.1, pp. 157-171 in the book "Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices" 3rd edition, Sage 2024)

September 22 (Reading 34 pages)

Stuart Hall, Sean Nixon, and Jessica Evans, "The Spectacle of the Other" Chapter 4, Sections 4.2, pp. 171-181, Section 4.3, pp. 181-191 & Section 4.4, pp.191-205 in "Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices" 3rd edition, Sage 2024)

September 29 (Reading 45 pages but 1/3 are illustrations)

T.F Earle and K.J.P Lowe "*Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*" Chapter 6, pp. 125-154 "Isabella d'Este and Black African Women"

Charmaine A. Nelson, "Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art", Introduction, pp. 1-16

October 6 (Reading 35 pages)

Charmaine A. Nelson, "Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art", Chapter One, "Through An-Other's Eyes" pp. 19-36

T.F Earle and K.J.P Lowe "*Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*" Chapter Four, 'Washing the Ethiopian White: conceptualizing Black Skin in Renaissance England.' pp. 94-112

October 11 Saturday

10:45am -1:45pm

Visit Irma Stern Exhibition at:

Brücke-Museum

Bussardsteig 9

14195 Berlin

October 13 (Reading 35 pages)

Charmaine A. Nelson, "Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art", Chapter Three: 'Slavery, Portraiture and the Colonial Limits of Canadian Art History' pp. 63- 75 and

Chapter Four: 'The Fruits of Resistance, Reading *Portrait of a Negro Slave* on the Sly' pp. 76-87

Stuart Hall, Sean Nixon, and Jessica Evans, "The Spectacle of the Other" (Chapter 4, Section 4.5, pp. 205-216,) in the book "Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices" 3rd edition, Sage 2024)

Friday October 17: Midterm essay due by midnight

Fall Break October 20 -26

Reminder: You should have finished reading the bell hooks book, Art on my Mind by October 27.

October 27 (Reading 37 pages)

Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity, 1992, 1994, pp 1-23 (PDF available to read online)

Stuart Hall, Sean Nixon, and Jessica Evans, "The Spectacle of the Other" (Chapter 4, Afterword Section 4.5, pp. 235-249,) in the book "Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices" 3rd edition, Sage 2024)

November 3 (Reading 29 pages)

Charmaine A. Nelson, "Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art",
Chapter Six: 'Colored Nude, Fetishization, Disguise, Dichotomy' pp. 106-121

Charmaine A. Nelson, "Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art",
Chapter Seven: 'The "Hottentot Venus" in Canada: Modernism, Censorship and the
Racial Limits of Female Sexuality' pp. 122-136

Class Presentation #1
Class Presentation #2
Class Presentation #3

November 10 No Class)

November 17 (Reading 38 pages)

Charmaine A. Nelson, "Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art",
Chapter Nine: 'Venus Africaine, Race, Beauty and African-ness,' pp. 158-169

bell hooks. "Art on My Mind: Visual Politics,"
Read the Introduction: Art Matters, and these two chapters: "Art on My Mind" and "The
Poetics of Soul: Art for Everyone."

Class Presentation #4
Class Presentation #5
Class Presentation #6

November 22

**Saturday Session Studio visit with artist
11am -2pm**

November 24 (Reading 25 pages)

bell hooks. "Art on My Mind: Visual Politics,"
Read the two chapters, "Talking Art with Carrie Mae Weems" and "Facing Difference:
The Black Female Body"
Class Presentation #7
Class Presentation #8
Class Presentation #9

December 8 (Reading 30 pages)

Last class session

Bell hooks, Art on My Mind: Visual Politics,"
Read the two chapters, 'Aesthetic Interventions' and 'Straighten Up and Fly Right:
Talking Art with Emma Amos'

Class Presentation #10
Class Presentation #11
Class Presentation #12

Final discussion.

December 8

Final essay due by midnight

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