

## COIL: Spring 2022

### Women, Power, Race, Intersectionality and Representation

#### Classes & Faculty

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#### Who and What: The Project in Brief

This COIL project was, for me, a way to try out something I have never done in any of many former (unofficial) COIL projects: to implement a very small module and do so in a fully asynchronous course. In brief, the project involved 30 Students in IDS 232 (American Identities HP/DPDS) at SSU & 20 students in 2 sections of Intro to American Lit at Aristotle Univ. of Thessaloniki, Greece. There were 2 faculty in Greece and me in Salem). The module's work was required of all SSU students but was an extra credit option in Greece (20 students self-identified out of about 200 in the larger course). In Greece the students were primarily 1<sup>st</sup> years taking a required course in their degree program. At SSU, the course was made up of students from all levels and included those who were majors and many/most who were taking it for Gen Ed. The project, in brief, was a 2 week module during which students read & discussed four "texts" about women, gender, race, intersectionality and power: themes that are at the heart of IDS 232. The discussions were done in large groups and the focus was to build off of and extend/engage with each other's analyses. The two weeks of discussion was preceded by a requirement that all students create and upload (we used Google Docs/Drive) a brief video introducing themselves.

Two of the texts were chosen by me and two were chosen by my Greek colleagues. They span genres and time periods. Two were poems: **Thessaloniki Text** : "Power," poem, Adrienne Rich; **Thessaloniki Text**: "Sanctuary", poem, Donika Kelly. One was a non-fiction text: **SSU Text**: Roxane Gay "Bad Feminist"- excerpt. And one was a video interview on YouTube: **SSU Text**: Keeanga Yamahtta Taylor "How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective".

**What worked particularly well in this COIL project** included its ease of implementation of students, the fact that it was do-able in a fully asynchronous online course, the robust discussion it solicited from students on both sides of the project, the fact that it helped my students see themselves as valuable and knowledgeable in a global context, and the intercultural engagements and skills that we had on display. I was cautious about how we would be able to pull off a module that was required for my students, an option for my partner's students and in which we knew we would not be able to have any synchronous Zoom meetings with the students. In the end, the clarity of the instructions allowed my students to engage with the Greek students in a way that rivaled and in many ways exceeded the intensity and sophistication of their discussions

among themselves in other portions of the course. Most critically, the nature of their discussions demonstrated willingness and ability to hear and truly engage with alternative world views as well as to raise questions about those differences in analysis (all critical intercultural competencies at the heart of all COIL projects). The texts we identified (two poems, one non-fiction piece and a recorded video interview) aligned and challenged each other in ways that the students picked up on. They also really loved the opportunity to make 30-60 second videos of themselves to introduce themselves and meet their peers (both in Salem and in Thessaloniki). These video introductions – completed in the week before the online discussions – were a late addition to the plan, but seemed to have been essential. As for the discussions themselves, what emerged was that (given the topic of intersectional lives and feminism) many of my SSU students began to see themselves and their own subject positions/lived experiences as valuable in both analyzing the texts and in educating their peers in Greece about their “real” lives in the US. Finally, developing clear guiding questions for each possible assigned reading, and laying out clear discussion guidelines that privileged curiosity and questioning over “debating” proved to be a great move. Students engaged in deep and respectful ways across difference.

**Some of the challenges faced** are those that impact nearly all such projects: the lack of perfect alignment between semester schedules and course materials/outcomes/curricula. Despite our many years of collaborating on other projects, my partner and I struggled in this context to find a way to align the timing of our linked module due to the various Easter and spring breaks in each country. We had decided early on that we wanted to focus on intersectionality and the words, voices, texts by Black women. Sequentially, this fits into my syllabus in a particular point of the semester; the alignment was a bit complex to pull off and I ended up reorganizing some of the rest of the term. So too, it was a bit of a challenge to find texts that were part of their (quite fixed) literature curricula that would fit with my more humanities/social science-focused course material. Both sets of students needed to be able to access these offerings. Apart from these, we had a bit of a complexity when a second Greek faculty member was added so that there were now three of us coordinating. And, for the Greek faculty this was merely to be an extra credit project, while for my students it was required. We were also unable to implement the portion of the project that we had originally been most excited about: having the students (in small groups) produce creative responses to the material. The asynchronous nature of my course made this just too complex to manage. Finally, we did not end up offering formal introductions to each other’s universities/cities (which I have done in all other COIL projects) or to each other via Zoom (as we had planned originally) and we did not have a formal follow up or reflection on the COIL for all students. Again, the end of our semester and its alignment with Easter Break in Greece led us to back off of work we had thought we’d ask students to do.

**Assessment:**

We were to have a survey for the students (regarding what they learned about the other country through this; how their thinking about race/gender in the US was challenged/shifted etc. as a result of discussing these texts with students in another country; their interest in visiting or learning more about the other country as a result of this) – but, the timing (Orthodox Easter break

for 2 key weeks in April) and unexpected crunches in both of our (faculty) lives meant that it did not happen. I could have done it just for my students but did not. Among other items I am realizing that it would have been valuable to have also asked students to reflect at the end of the module on how/whether this COIL connected to/helped them increase their skills in the DPDS-specific outcomes of the course.

Instead, I used my regular general end-of-semester informal assessment to see whether this project stayed with them at the end of the course and if so, why.

I asked the students (as I always do in this course): *What item/topic/experience from this class will stick with you long after the class is over?//Consider what has most profoundly upended or complicated something you knew before or had never known about*

Of the 20 students who completed the end of semester general assessment, 4 of them (20%) identified this COIL project as THE most impactful part of the course. And their responses **affirmed some of my observations about impact and successes:**

- Students on both sides were quite engaged (the level of participation was very high)
- Good conversation that flowed more than not.
- The diversity of our students was an asset – intersectionality was a theme of the texts and many of our students could speak directly to it.
- Their understanding of how cultural and social location shifts understanding and analysis was enhanced.
- Students were appreciative of the opportunity to meet and connect with peers in a place none knew about (videos spoke to this)
- Students enjoyed the novelty of it.

Student responses:

- *I found the Salem/Greece collaboration to be really enjoyable. It was a unique opportunity to be able to interact with students from another country. I also found it exciting to read about their different perspectives on the same topics.*
- *An experience that will stick with me would definitely be the Greece/Salem discussions. I never had done something like that before. It was awesome getting to respond back and talk to new people. I think it was a great educational experience.*
- *I think that working with another country was a great experience. Having a chance to work with the students from the University of Thessaloniki granted me the chance to see a perspective I have never been introduced to. This was my first personal experience working with students outside of the country. I also enjoyed the discussion posts. The way the discussions were set up created a very interactive space.*
- *....the Greece/Salem discussion was very fun and engaging since the content we analyzed was informative. When writing my discussion, I was able to use the ideas of my peers and students from Greece to create a more nuanced response. It was a very positive experience.*

## ASSIGNMENT & Prompts

### Instructions:

1. Students: please make a little video (30-60 seconds) and upload it into the subfolder named "Introductory Videos". Video should state your name, what year you are in university, what you are studying and what you like to do in your free time. After Uploading your video, please watch the videos of all the other students.
  2. All students will read the assigned readings (found in the folder), consider **the guiding questions** that we pose for each one [these questions/prompts are found in the DISCUSSION FOLDER] and then engage in a conversation with the other students.
  3. Each student will participate in TWO discussions.  
You will discuss ONE of the readings from Thessaloniki (named Thessaloniki Reading #1 \_\_\_TITLE and Thessaloniki Reading #2 \_\_Title)  
  
AND ONE of the readings from Salem (named Salem Reading #1 \_\_Title and Salem Reading #2 \_\_TITLE)
1. The structure of each discussion is to pick up on the discussion as it evolves. Students should read the discussion up to the point where they enter it and extend or continue it. The KEY is to use evidence from the readings to explore the questions/themes at hand.
  2. All discussions will abide by the discussion guidelines we've developed
    1. "engaging fully" means reading and responding substantively to the observations and reactions of other students
    2. offering specific, text-based evidence for arguments or responses and pushing each other to expand or extend conversations as the discussion develops
    3. speaking only for yourself, not for any group
    4. recognizing that all students are coming from discrete and different social and cultural locations **and approaching one another with a sense of \*curiosity\*** if you read something that is very different from your own response or reaction – in these situations, ask for more clarification.
  3. You all have access to TYPE DIRECTLY into the Discussion Documents.

**MOST IMPORTANTLY: HAVE FUN and GET TO KNOW ONE ANOTHER!!!**

## Reading Prompts/Guiding Questions

### **ROXANE GAY “Bad Feminist” (2012)**

**Student Instructions:** please engage fully with each other. The idea here is that you are building a discussion. So, before contributing, please read what has been written already and pick it up. Ask each other questions, extend, challenge, etc. Use details/evidence from the readings.

### **PROMPTS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS.**

Gay makes the claim that she is a “bad feminist”. What does she mean by this?; What does she mean by “doing feminism wrong”?; How do race and gender factor into her thinking about feminism? (do a little research on who Gay is); At the end of the essay she makes a statement about why she won’t give up on feminism. What do you think of her final claim?; How do you position yourself vis a vis feminism?

### **“POWER” by Adrienne Rich**

**Student Instructions:** please engage fully with each other. The idea here is that you are building a discussion. So, before contributing, please read what has been written already and pick it up. Ask each other questions, extend, challenge, etc. Use details/evidence from the readings.

**Questions/Prompts:** What kind of power is foregrounded in the poem? Reflect on the relationship between women and science in the past century and the present day. How has society conditioned women’s position in relationship to knowledge, research, technology, innovation and positions of power?

What do you think of the fact that Curie was aware of the dangerous effect of radiation, yet remained dedicated to pursuing science until it destroyed her body?

“She died a famous woman”: reflect on constructions of fame today. What venues of fame are valued and promoted by the media?

### **Keeanga Yamaha Taylor “How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective”**

**Student Instructions:** please engage fully with each other. The idea here is that you are building a discussion. So, before contributing, please read what has been written already and pick it up. Ask each other questions, extend, challenge, etc. Use details/evidence from the readings.

**QUESTIONS/PROMPTS for DISCUSSION:** Taylor speaks about “interlocking oppression”: how does this shape/challenge ideas about “gender” as the/a critical mode of analysis? How does it challenge ideas about the role of gender in the lives of women of color?; What are the

connections you see between understanding the lived experiences of Black women and transforming the world we live in for justice?

### **Link Again**

[Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor: What We Can Learn From the Black Feminists of the Combahee River Collective](#)

### **SANCTUARY” -poem by Donika Kelly**

**Student Instructions:** please engage fully with each other. The idea here is that you are building a discussion. So, before contributing, please read what has been written already and pick it up. Ask each other questions, extend, challenge, etc. Use details/evidence from the readings.

**Questions:** What does a sanctuary mean to you and how does it connect with femininity? What about the life forms that feature in the poem? How is female subjectivity presented in the poem and what does the tone in the poem convey? What thoughts do the words “crumple,” “tide pool,” “vanishing point,” “barking voice,” “cyclone fence” trigger?

### **Some Student Work**

**Excerpts from discussions between/among SSU and AUPh students (note: students also used the “comment” option in google docs to respond to one another – harder to showcase here). These are just 2 of many examples.**

#### **Example 1**

##### **Student at Salem State University**

Hi [student at AUPh], after reading your response to [another student at AUPh, this reading's meaning is much more powerful. It's insane how “white feminists” become defensive when women of color are brought into the conversation of feminism because black women have always fought for women's rights but they are continuously overlooked. I'm also appalled to read about what happened to Roxanne when she was 12. I agree with your point about how her thought process on feminism is great for representing all the women who feel like they don't fit into some “box” placed by societal standards or in the feminism realm. Women are judged no matter what they do or like or how they act. There is so much pressure and guilt put on women to do opposing things just to satisfy someone's ideal of what they think a woman or a feminist “should” be. It feels like an endless cycle and I empathize with your experiences as well.

##### **Student at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki [ responding to the above]**

Hi [student at SSU] Well said, it is indeed an endless cycle. If you are interested in reading the article it is on theguardian.com and it is titled “My body is a cage of my own making”. She has had to deal with so much discrimination as an oversized. black woman.

## **Example 2**

### **Student at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki [ responding to a discussion being carried on between an SSU student and another AUTH student]**

For me a sanctuary is a safe place, like its literal meaning but in the forms of movies and tv series I watch repeatedly and books I re-read. In terms of femininity, a sanctuary could be related to the whole mentality that is -fortunately- constantly cultivated, of “women supporting women” and in the age of MeToo the sanctuary is the community that believes and offers shelter to victims of abuse. I was impressed by [SSU Student’s] response to this, stating that our bodies can be sanctuaries that contain our souls, too. I, also, agree with [AUTH Student’s] answer regarding the vulnerability that a sanctuary is connected with, in combination with [Auth Student’s] opinion about society linking women with the sensitivity and need of a safe place, while simultaneously depriving them of one. The tone of the poem except from melancholic -that was mutually agreed in the previous responses- also tries to highlight a division. The line “How to understand, then, what deserves rescue and what deserves to suffer” could be a reference to the feminism initially expressed only for white women; and an attempt to shed light to the discrimination of black women inside the “sanctuary” that advocates for every woman’s safety and rights. Eleni makes an interesting point by comparing the sizes of the ocean, that in the poem is not associated with a woman, and that of the tide pool which refers to women. The ocean is untamed, free and unpredictable, whereas a tide pool is much more restricted and contained, that might be an ironic comment on how women are expected to behave, and unevenly shaped- which could also be referring to body positivity.

### **Student at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki**

As [Auth student] and [SSU Student] mention, the language used in the poem further underline this helplessness, the “littleness” of women as they try to become their own sanctuaries, but are continuously beaten down by society’s standards. So, the division between “what deserves rescue and what deserves to suffer [...] what must be sheltered and what abandoned” becomes in the poem a matter of nature. Humans and their society are stripped of agency, of freedom of choice, as it all comes back to the overpowering force of nature -in the form of the ocean- present in the poem.

**Student at SSU [responding to the above last line]:** I loved that you [AUTH student] touched on this concept. I missed the freedom of choice message and interpreted it as being unheard. I can see where you got this interpretation from with the overpowering force of nature comment you made as well as the cyclone verse in the poem