

**AWARD-WINNING PLAYWRIGHTS**  
**ENGL 281Z/THEA 280Z/AFAM 279Z**  
**Winter Session 2025**

**Instructor:** Dr. [Rashida Z. Shaw McMahon, Ph.D. \(she/her\)](#)

Email: [rsawmcmahon@wesleyan.edu](mailto:rsawmcmahon@wesleyan.edu)

Office Hours: email for appointment via Zoom

**Course Schedule:** M, T, W, TH, F 10a.m.-noon *and* 1p.m.-3p.m.

Course Website: Moodle

**Recurring Zoom Link:**

[HTTPS://WESLEYAN.ZOOM.US/J/98510968619?PWD=OJ9XLIRJRXOHQLIEJXCfj1YFO6BVRT.1](https://wesleyan.zoom.us/j/98510968619?pwd=OJ9XLIRJRXOHQLIEJXCfj1YFO6BVRT.1)

Meeting ID: 985 1096 8619

Passcode: 880939

**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

With textual analysis and intellectual criticism at its core, this course examines the dramatic work of award-winning playwrights through theoretical, performative, and aesthetic frames. The first third of our investigation explores companion texts written by premier playwrights. In the latter end of the course, we examine singular texts written by acclaimed newcomers. A select range of reviews and popular press publications help to supplement our discussions. In all cases, we are interested in surveying the ways in which these playwrights work within varying modes of dramatic expression and focus their plays on such topics as class, ethnicity, era, disability, gender, locale, nationality, race, and/or sexuality.

**REQUIRED TEXTS**

Play texts, articles, and reviews are available on our Olin Library Electronic Reserves page or Moodle.

Debbie Tucker Green <i>Born Bad</i>	James I James <i>Fat Ham</i>
Michael R. Jackson <i>A Strange Loop</i>	Branden Jacobs Jenkins <i>Gloria</i>
Stephen Karam <i>The Humans</i>	Tony Kushner <i>Angels in America</i>
Martyna Majok <i>Cost of Living</i>	Lynn Nottage <i>Clyde's</i>
Lynn Nottage <i>Sweat</i>	William Shakespeare <i>Hamlet</i>
Paula Vogel <i>Indecent</i>	

**OPTIONAL READINGS & VIDEOS**

Our Electronic Reserves page contains several articles, reviews, and videos that are not required reading or viewing for the course. Many of these are not listed on our syllabus. Optional readings provide helpful insight into the play of the day and will be incorporated into our class discussions as needed. You can access these materials at your will.

**Please note that except for in the case of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, videos are not substitutes for reading plays.**

Videos are for use in class discussions and should be considered supplemental course material.

This syllabus and schedule are subject to change.

I will post announcements of changes on Moodle and include them in email messages to students.

## ACCOMMODATION STATEMENT

Wesleyan University is committed to ensuring that all qualified students with disabilities are afforded an equal opportunity to participate in, and benefit from, its programs and services. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact Accessibility Services as soon as possible.

If you have a disability, or think that you might have a disability, please contact [Accessibility Services](#) in order to arrange an appointment to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations. Accessibility Services is located in North College, rooms 021/022, or can be reached by email ([accessibility@wesleyan.edu](mailto:accessibility@wesleyan.edu)) or phone (860-685-5581).

## RELIGIOUS/SPIRITUAL OBSERVANCE RESOURCES

If you anticipate that your religious/spiritual observance may conflict with academic obligations such as attending class, taking examinations, or submitting assignments, you can work directly with your professor to make reasonable arrangements. Should you require additional support or guidance, please feel free to reach out to Rabbi David Teva, Director of the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life at [dleipziger@wesleyan.edu](mailto:dleipziger@wesleyan.edu) or any of the chaplains in the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life at <https://www.wesleyan.edu/orsl/index.html>.

For a list of religious holidays celebrated by members of the Wesleyan community, go to Wesleyan's Multifaith calendar which can be found at: <https://www.wesleyan.edu/orsl/multifaith-calendar.html>.

## TITLE IX RESOURCES

If gender-based and/or sexual violence related trauma inhibits your ability to fully participate in class, please contact Debbie Colucci, Title IX Coordinator, at [dcolucci@wesleyan.edu](mailto:dcolucci@wesleyan.edu), or your class dean. Additionally, and if you are comfortable, you can work directly with your professor to make reasonable arrangements. You may also choose to talk with a confidential resource about all of your options for care and support. Confidential resources can be found the Office of Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), WesWell, and the Office for Religious and Spiritual Life.

## CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR

Students and faculty each have responsibility for maintaining an appropriate learning environment. Those who fail to adhere to such behavioral standards may be subject to discipline. Professional courtesy and sensitivity are especially important with respect to individuals and topics dealing with differences of race, color, culture, religion, creed, politics, veteran's status, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, gender expression, age, ability, and nationality. Class rosters are provided to the instructor with the student's legal name. I will gladly honor your request to address you by an alternate name or gender pronoun. Please advise me of this preference early in the semester so that I may make appropriate changes to my records. For more information, see the policies on [the student code](#).

## DISCRIMINATION AND HARASSMENT

Wesleyan University is committed to maintaining a positive learning, working, and living environment and does not tolerate identity-based [discriminatory harassment](#) and/or [sexual misconduct](#) against students, faculty, staff, trustees, volunteers, and employees of any university contractors/agents. For purposes of this Wesleyan policy, identity refers to one's race, color, religion, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, veteran status, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, and gender expression. The Office for Equity and Inclusion serves students, faculty, administrators and develops policies and procedures regarding issues of diversity and equal opportunity/affirmative action. Individuals who believe they have been discriminated against should contact the [Office for Equity and Inclusion](#) at 860-685-4771.

## HONOR CODE

All Wesleyan students are responsible for knowing and upholding [the Honor Code](#). Feel free to contact me about any questions related to course expectations. If you have a question related specifically to the honor code, please contact Assistant Dean of Student/Director of Community Standards Kevin Butler - ([kbutler@wesleyan.edu](mailto:kbutler@wesleyan.edu)).

**ON NAMES AND NAMING:**

It is important that we call each other by our names, by who we are, and whom we know ourselves to be in the world. In class and in communications, I prefer to be addressed by Dr. McMahon, Dr. Shaw McMahon or Professor McMahon or Professor Shaw McMahon. My preferred pronouns are she, her. On the first day of class and thereafter, please feel free to communicate your name, race, ethnicity, tribal community/nation, pronouns, and any other way you would like our classroom community to know and/or address you. You will have multiple opportunities throughout the semester to share this information with the class. I ask that everyone in the class abide by each other's wishes for how they'd like to be addressed and known.

**CONTENT WARNING LANGUAGE**

I acknowledge that each of you comes to Wesleyan with your own unique life experiences. This contributes to the way you perceive various types of information. This semester, all of our class content, including that which may be intellectually or emotionally challenging, has been intentionally curated to achieve the learning goals for this course. The decision to include such material is not taken lightly. These topics include, but are not limited to, rape, incest, the death, discrimination, homophobia, and racism. I encourage you to take care of yourself and utilize the resources available to you on campus. If the content of this class becomes distressing, please contact me directly so that we can find solutions together. If you ever feel the need to step outside during one of these discussions, you may always do so.

**WELLNESS STATEMENT**

Students may experience stressors that can impact both their academic experience and their personal well-being. These stressors may include academic pressures, sleep problems, relationship and social concerns, and challenges associated with adjusting to school, mental health, alcohol or other drugs, identities, finances, life events or something not listed here. If you or a friend are experiencing concerns, remember that we all benefit from assistance and guidance at times. Reach out to [CAPS](#), [WesWell](#), visit the [Resource Room](#) to support your mental health and well-being.

**AI STATEMENT**

The use of AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Bing, Elicit, Google Translate etc.) is prohibited for any part of this class *including, but not limited to, the generation of ideas, writing of text, or rewriting your own work*. If you have any questions about a particular AI tool or use, please consult with me before using. Unauthorized use of AI tools in this class will be considered a violation of Wesleyan's Honor Code.

## COURSE ASSESSMENTS

*Instructions for all essay assignments and discussion posts are available on Moodle.*

**Participation: 10%** (Involves active engagement with the material and with your peers during online class sessions as well as any bonus discussion posts.)

### Three Essay Assignments:

- **Pre-Class “Tony Kushner” Essay:** 20% (Due on Sunday, January 5<sup>th</sup> at midnight via Moodle)
- **“One Play Focus” Essay:** 20% (Due on Sunday, January 19<sup>th</sup> at midnight via Moodle)
- **Final “Op-Ed” Essay:** 20% (Due one week after class ends on Monday, January 27<sup>th</sup> at midnight via Moodle)

### Five Required Discussion Posts: 30% (6 points each)

Each student is required to post questions, comments, or thoughts to the online Discussions Forum about the readings at least FIVE TIMES.

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## GRADE SCALE

This course uses Wesleyan University’s standard grading scale. The official chart is located at [http://www.wesleyan.edu/registrar/general\\_information/GPA\\_calculation.html](http://www.wesleyan.edu/registrar/general_information/GPA_calculation.html)

## ASSESSMENT STANDARDS

- A Superior work demonstrating student’s ability to engage the materials in a stimulating, creative, and insightful manner; clearly written with no or minimal typographical or grammatical errors
- B Completion of requirements demonstrating student’s understanding of materials and ability to apply knowledge; minor writing and/or conceptual problems
- C Moderate completion of assignment requirements; lacks clear writing or has significant conceptual problems, and/or is inadequately proof-read
- D Unsatisfactory work; failure to engage with most of materials presented; unfocused discussion; failure to meet majority of requirements of the assignment
- F Failed to complete/turn-in assignment; does not fulfill any requirements

## ATTENDANCE/ZOOM ETIQUETTE

**Missing more than two classes** without a doctor’s note or other comparable emergency will drop your FINAL LETTER GRADE to the next plus or minus grade, per absence (i.e., A to an A-, B+ to a B). **Missing consecutive classes** is not recommended. **In extreme cases, students will be asked to withdraw from the course.**

**Withdrawal from course.** Students who miss four or more classes will be asked to withdraw from the course. Students who miss two consecutive assignments will be asked to withdraw from the course. This is a nonnegotiable policy. (*Suggestion:* at all times, speak to me about any challenges you have completing assignments, ASAP.)

**Three tardies amount to one unexcused absence.** If you think you may have a problem attending our Zoom class sessions, please email me ASAP.

**Zoom Etiquette:** Students are expected to be fully visible during our Zoom classes unless approval has been granted by me for a special circumstance. In these moments, students are encouraged to fully participate via Zoom’s live chat platform, as an alternative. Please email me if you anticipate having technological challenges that would prevent you from being visible during Zoom class sessions.

## COURSE SCHEDULE

\*All readings can be accessed via Olin's Electronic Reserves page unless otherwise noted.

**Pre-Course Assignment:** \*read early, play is over 200-pages in length

- **Read Play:** Tony Kushner, *Angels in America – Part I: Millennium Approaches* and *Part II: Perestroika* (1991)
- **Submit: “Tony Kushner” Essay:** by Sunday, January 5<sup>th</sup> at midnight via Moodle)

### WEEK ONE

**“Tony Kushner” Essay:** Due Sunday, January 5<sup>th</sup> at midnight via Moodle

**Tuesday, January 7:** [Course Introduction and Discussion of *Angels in America*]

- **Article:** Jesse Green. “When Political Art Mattered: Art = Change,” *New York Times Magazine*, Dec. 7, 2003
- **Article:** Bruce Webber, “Angels’ Angels,” *New York Times Magazine*, April 25, 1993
- **Review:** David Richards, “‘Angels’ Finds A Poignant Note of Hope,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 28, 1993

**Wednesday, January 8:** Paula Vogel, *Indecent* (2015)

**Thursday, January 9:**

- Lynn Nottage, *Sweat* (2015) and Lynn Nottage, *Clyde’s* (2021) – please read *Sweat* first
- **Optional Article:** Michael Schulman, “The First Theatrical Landmark of the Trump Era,” *The New Yorker*, March 27, 2017 [M =Moodle]
- **Optional Article:** Ben Brantley, “*Sweat*, Imagines the Local Bar as a Caldron.” *The New York Times*, March 26, 2017 [M]

**Friday, January 10:** Stephen Karam, *The Humans* (2016)

### WEEK TWO

**Monday, January 13:** James Ijames, *Fat Ham* (2022)

- Please read/view/listen to *Hamlet* before you read *Fat Ham*. We do not have time to devote an entire class to *Hamlet* but the connections to Shakespeare’s play will be self-evident once you acquaint/reacquaint yourself with *Hamlet*. I have made the play available on Electronic Reserves in various forms.
  - **Play:** William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*  
(See [Electronic Reserves](#) for book, e-book, DVD, and streamed audio options)

**Tuesday, January 14:** Michael R. Jackson, *A Strange Loop* (2019)

- **Soundtrack:** I encourage you to listen the music while you read the play. The music can be purchased for a reasonable price on Itunes, Amazon music unlimited. Some songs are searchable and available on Youtube for free.
- **Optional Article:** Michael Paulson, “As ‘A Strange Loop’ Ends, Its Creator Looks Back on a ‘Supernova,’” *New York Times*, January 16, 2023

**Wednesday, January 15:** Martyna Majok, *The Cost of Living* (2016)

- **Optional Review:** Jesse Green, “Review: In ‘Cost of Living,’ a Familiar Alienation,” *The New York Times*, June 7, 2017 [M]
- **Optional Review:** Charles McNulty, “Review: Martyna Majok’s Pulitzer-winning drama ‘Cost of Living’ has found an ideal home at Fountain Theatre,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 12, 2018 [M]

**Thursday, January 16:** debbie tucker green, *born bad* (2003)

- **Optional Review:** Aleks Sierz, “If you hate the show, at least you have passion,” *The Independent*, April 27, 2003 [M]
- **Optional Article:** Trish Reid, “‘Killing Joy as a World Making Project’: Anger in the Work of debbie tucker green,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* (2018), 28.3: 390-400.

**Friday, January 17:** Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, *Gloria* (2015)

“One Play Focus” Essay: Due Sunday, January 19<sup>th</sup> at midnight via Moodle

### WEEK THREE

**Monday, January 20:**

- **View Streamed Video:** “Hamilton: One Shot to Broadway” (2017)
- **Read Website Content:** [We See You White American Theater](#) (Statements, Principles, Demands, Tenets)
- **Read:** Patrick A. Bradford, “Broadway’s Banner Season for Black Playwrights,” *Black Masks*, 27.3 (Spring 2022): 7-8, 14-15
- **Read:** Nathan Pugh, Anonymous Essays: Unnecessary, September 14, 2023 <https://www.3viewstheater.com/bonus-material/anonymous-essays-unnecessary>
- **Open Discussion:** What would it mean to write a Theater Op-Ed that would provide your own insights on the plays we have read, in consideration of our current social and cultural milieux?

Final “Op-Ed” Essay: Due Monday, January 27<sup>th</sup> at midnight via Moodle