


ENGL 441-01: Writing the Caribbean Diaspora

Dr. Jenna Grace Sciuto, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts

Course Description: Writing the Caribbean Diaspora

This interdisciplinary course centers around contemporary Caribbean diasporic novels by women writers that are heavily grounded in history and place. Each novel focuses on experiences of relocating from the Caribbean to the United States, as well as the relationship between place and identity. We will investigate the layering of identities—including gender, ethnicity, race, class, and sexuality—in key novels by Cuban-American Cristina García, Dominican-American Nelly Rosario, and Haitian-American Edwidge Danticat. The novels will be paired with historical and theoretical texts, such as writing by Cuban José Martí, Dominican Salomé Ureña, and Haitian Jacques Stephen Alexis, that will serve as another lens through which we will consider the intersections of history, place, and identity. We will explore a diversity of texts (literature, film, music, visual and performance art) in a manner that subverts linear understandings of time to make both transhistorical and cross-cultural connections, accounting for different social, political, and cultural perspectives.



Course Goals: Writing the Caribbean Diaspora

- 1) Students will analyze and interrogate the representations of locally situated histories in various forms of cultural production.
- 2) Students will demonstrate an understanding of the socially constructed and situated nature of identity and be able to apply an intersectional lens to a multiplicity of texts.
- 3) Students will explore a diversity of texts in a manner that subverts linear understandings of time to make both transhistorical and cross-cultural connections, accounting for different social, political, and cultural perspectives.
- 4) Students will recognize the interconnection of nations, histories, and cultures in today's global society.



Required Texts: Novels, Stories, Prose

Novels

Dreaming in Cuban (1992) by Cristina Garcia

Song of the Water Saints (2002) by Nelly Rosario

Breath, Eyes, Memory (1994) by Edwidge Danticat

Short Stories

“Girl,” “In the Night,” “The Letter from Home,” “Blackness,” and “My Mother” from *At the Bottom of the River* (1983) by Jamaica Kincaid

“Kimberle” (2017) by Achy Obejas

Nonfictional Prose

José Martí “A Town Sets a Black Man on Fire” (1892), “My Race” (1893), “The Truth about the United States” (1894)

“Seeing Double: Creative Writing as Translation” (2012) by Nelly Rosario

“Voices from Hispaniola: A Meridians Roundtable with Edwidge Danticat, Loida Maritza Pérez, Myriam J.A. Chancy, and Nelly Rosario” (2004)

Excerpts from *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* (2010) by Edwidge Danticat

Required Texts: Folktale, Poetry, Film, Visual and Performance Art, Music

Folktale

“The Tale of Bouki and Malice” Recorded by Jacques Stephen Alexis (1980) and
Translated by Sharon Masingale

Poetry

Selected Poems by Salomé Ureña

Film

Vers le sud (Heading South) (2005) Directed by Laurent Cantet

Visual and Performance Art

Margueriete Hemmings, Myrlande Constant, Louisiane Saint Fleurant, Edouard Duval-Carrié, Scherezade García,
Rosalba Hernández, Belkis Ramirez, Lucía Méndez Tania Bruguera, Coco Fusco, Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara

Music

Buju Banton, and...



Course Schedule

Introductory Unit

9.4: Art by Margueriete Hemmings; Music by Buju Banton; Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl"

9.9: "In the Night," "The Letter from Home," "Blackness," and "My Mother" from *At the Bottom of the River* by Jamaica Kincaid; "Voices from Hispaniola: A Meridians Roundtable with Edwidge Danticat, Loida Maritza Pérez, Myriam J.A. Chancy, and Nelly Rosario"

Cuban and Cuban-American Texts

9.11: "Kimberle" by Achy Obejas; Art by Tania Bruguera, Coco Fusco, Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara

9.16: "José Martí "A Town Sets a Black Man on Fire," "My Race," "The Truth about the United States"

9.18: *Dreaming in Cuban* by Cristina García

9.23: *Dreaming in Cuban*

9.25: *Dreaming in Cuban*

9.30: **Reading Literature through Martí Paper Due**, *Dreaming in Cuban*



Course Schedule

Dominican and Dominican-American Texts

10.2: “Seeing Double: Creative Writing as Translation” by Nelly Rosario; Art by Scherezade García, Rosalba Hernández, Belkis Ramirez, and Lucía Méndez

10.7: Poetry by Salomé Ureña; Music by ...

10.9: *Song of the Water Saints* by Nelly Rosario

10.16: *Song of the Water Saints*

10.21: **Short Comparative Analysis Paper Due**, *Song of the Water Saints*

10.23: *Song of the Water Saints*



Course Schedule

Haitian and Haitian-American Texts

10.28: Excerpts from *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* by Edwidge Danticat; Art by Myrlande Constant, Louisiane Saint Fleurant, Edouard Duval-Carrié

10.30: “The Tale of Bouki and Malice” Recorded by Jacques Stephen Alexis

11.4: *Breath, Eyes, Memory* by Edwidge Danticat

11.6: *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

11.13: *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

11.18: **Proposal for Final Project Due**, Final Project Workshop; *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

11.20: *Vers le sud (Heading South)* Directed by Laurent Cantet

11.25: *Vers le sud (Heading South)*

Intertextual Art Presentations

12.2: Presentations

12.4: Presentations

12.9: Presentations, **Final Project Due**



Course Assignments

Canvas Reading Responses: Short responses (100-200 words) to the readings are due the day of each class meeting. Responses should be thoughtful, specific, and detailed and are intended to help you engage and keep with the readings. **Responses must be posted to Canvas by 12pm the day of class.**

Intertextual Art Presentation: At the end of the semester, each student will select a work of art that is not primarily literary--such as music, visual or performance art, dance etc.--to present and discuss with the class in connection with course themes and the assigned readings.

Writing Assignments:

- | | |
|--|------------|
| 1. Reading Literature through Martí (3 pages) | Due: 9/30 |
| 2. Short Comparative Analysis Paper (3 pages) | Due: 10/21 |
| 3. Proposal for Final Project | Due: 11/18 |
| 4. Final Project: Comparative Analysis, Creative, or Translation (5-7 pages) | Due: 12/9 |

****Attendance at a film screening outside of class will supplant exam period****



Reading Literature through Martí

José Martí, a central literary, cultural, and political figure to Cuba and the Cuban Diaspora, wrote widely from New York in the 1880s and 1890s. While with good reason, many scholars position him as ahead of his time in many ways, he is also a product of his period and the spaces in which he circulated. This assignment asks that you work both intertextually and transhistorically to use writings by Martí as a lens through which to read contemporary Cuban-American literature. For instance, Pilar states in *Dreaming in Cuban* that art “is the ultimate revolution” (235). How does this concept relate to the relationship between revolution and writing in Martí’s texts?

Your discussion should center on a particular theme or topic of interest to you that might serve as a connection between Martí’s writing and the fiction of Cristina García and Achy Obejas, such as race relations, gender dynamics, class structures, performativity, neo-imperialism/expansion, violence, social hierarchies and inequalities, Inter-American relations, or art and revolution. Be sure to contextualize your discussion, leaving space for the particulars of each writer’s situatedness.

- 1) Select a theme or topic discussed in the writings by Martí that relates well to your understanding of García’s and/or Obejas’s fiction.
- 2) Identify direct passages from each text that demonstrate this connection. You must quote from each writing, but the balance is up to you.
- 3) Analyze the passages as evidence for your connection, and close read the language of the texts: what specific words or phrases led you to the ideas you express?
- 4) Consider the broader significance of this theme or topic for each text as a whole: why is this theme important for your understanding of the literature in particular?

Short Comparative Analysis

This assignment asks that you draw an insightful, analytic connection between two works with attention paid to both the texts and their contexts. Thus, each paper should incorporate a close-reading of the language, including an analysis of quotations from both texts, in addition to a brief overview of how the texts are situated culturally and historically. The focus of this essay should be a detailed interpretation of a particular theme, symbol, character, or formal/aesthetic technique, but be sure to also expand out, discussing how the parts contribute to the overall effect of the works you select.

In sum, your paper should include a thesis statement, evidence from the text (in the form of direct quotations), as well as an analysis of that evidence and a sense of the context for each work. You may see this as a close reading paper that places two works in dialogue.

Requirements:

- A thesis: as with any paper, you should attempt to prove an argument or perspective regarding your reading and analysis of the text at hand.

Your essay should begin with a question or thesis that is an assertion about the meaning, function, or significance of the passage you've chosen to explicate.

- Evidence from the text: what specific words or phrases led you to the ideas you express? Quote them.
- Analysis of that evidence: explain specifically and in detail how you arrived at your interpretation.
- Contextual overview of the work, situating it in terms of time and space

Final Project

The final project is open in nature with three options to accommodate your interests. All three projects should include an MLA-style bibliography that cites all sources referenced.

- 1) **Final Comparative Analysis with Research**
- 2) **Creative Project**
- 3) **Translation Project**

Final Comparative Analysis with Research

This essay asks you to engage in a literary analysis of two texts that will be supplemented by secondary/critical research. This essay will make a well-supported, unique argument. Topics will be grounded in or inspired by any of the works that we have read or engaged with this semester.

Select a two or more literary and/or art works to put in conversation with each other. Building on your previous comparative work, draw an insightful, analytic connection between the two or more texts (broadly construed). At least one of the texts selected should be a work you have not written on before. The focus of this essay should be a detailed interpretation of a particular theme, symbol, or formal/aesthetic technique, but be sure to also expand out, discussing how the parts contribute to the overall effect of the works you select. Your paper should include a thesis statement, evidence from the text (in the form of direct quotations), as well as an analysis of that evidence. Be sure to contextualize both texts and leave space for considerations of form, particularly in interdisciplinary projects.

Final Project

Creative Project

This is an open format project, the specifics of which should be determined by the creator in conversation with the professor. Please work in whatever medium you choose to expand on the readings and discussions from this course. You should shed light on an aspect of the material in a new and creative way. Your creative project should be accompanied by a brief essay reflecting on your work and the connections you are making.

Guidelines for final creative project:

You must directly connect to the themes and material of the course.

The effort, time, energy should be equivalent to the writing of a 5-7 page research paper.

The assignment cannot be used towards credit in another course.

Translation Project

This assignment is primarily for bilingual and multilingual students. Research a writer, such as Dominican poet Salomé Ureña, who wrote primarily in a language other than English and whose work has not been widely translated. Select 3-5 poems or 1-3 pages of prose to translate into English. As revealed by our in-class discussions, translation involves artistic or poetic license. The translator must make choices in the attempt to retain not only the meaning but also the style of the original text. A brief essay explaining your choices should accompany your translation.