

Jenna Grace Sciuto
Narrative for "Writing the Caribbean Diaspora"

For my institute project, I designed a new course, "Writing the Caribbean Diaspora." This interdisciplinary course centers around contemporary Caribbean diasporic novels by women writers that are heavily grounded in history and place. I have structured the course roughly by location and have selected novels that focus on experiences of relocating from the Caribbean to the United States, as well as the relationship between place and identity. Throughout the semester we will investigate the layering of identities—including gender, ethnicity, race, class, and sexuality. The central novels I plan to assign are *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) by Cuban-American Cristina García, *Song of the Water Saints* (2002) by Dominican-American Nelly Rosario, and *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) by Haitian-American Edwidge Danticat. To varying degrees each novel focuses on the experiences of multiple generations of women living in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and also in the United States in Florida and New York. 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. The course explores 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.

I've developed course goals to help me to articulate the skills, experiences, and knowledge that I would like students to leave the course with at the end of the semester. The first is that I want students to analyze and interrogate representations of locally situated histories in various forms of cultural production. Although grounded primarily in the literary, I am attempting to build a course that is more fully interdisciplinary, down to its bones, by incorporating art, film, and music within each unit. Secondly, I would like my students to develop an understanding of the socially constructed and situated nature of identity and be able to apply an intersectional lens to a multiplicity of texts. Third, I want my students to explore a wide range of texts with a nonlinear methodology that allows them to draw transhistorical and cross-cultural connections, taking into account varying social, political, and cultural positions. Finally, I want my students to leave the course with the ability to recognize the interconnection of nations, histories, and cultures in today's global society—a skill which hopefully they will carry with them into their other classes and experiences.

The introductory unit is designed to familiarize students with the themes and also the goals of the course: thus, opening with a wide-range of texts elucidating the entwinement of race, gender, sexuality, and class in diasporic cultural production, specifically work by Marguerite Hemmings, Buju Banton, and Jamaica Kincaid. The next unit will focus primarily on texts by Cuban and Cuban American writers and artists, although I never want these geographies to confine our discussions and will encourage dialogue across units, spaces, and cultures. We will open with Achy Obejas's short story "Kimberle" and art by Tania Bruguera, Coco Fusco, Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara. The

second day will be devoted to close work with three texts written by José Martí: “A Town Sets a Black Man on Fire,” “My Race,” and “The Truth about the United States.” I will ground this discussion solidly in the spaces and period Martí was writing from, but the material will also serve as a lens through which to consider more contemporary literary texts. Moreover, we will listen to and analyze different versions of the song “Guantanamera.” The unit will close with García’s *Dreaming in Cuban*, focusing on the experiences of multiple generations of women in a single family from the 1930s to 1970s.

The unit on Dominican and Dominican-America texts will open with an article by Nelly Rosario on creative writing as translation, as well as visual and performance art by Scherezade García, Rosalba Hernández, Belkis Ramirez, and Lucía Méndez. We will move to a discussion of the poetry of Salomé Ureña, as well as a discussion of music by Rita Indiana and Juan Luis Guerra. We will consider questions of form, identity, history, and place in Nelly Rosario’s *Song of the Water Saints*, which centers on four generations of women spanning from the U.S. Occupation of the Dominican Republic to the waves of immigration from the D.R. to the U.S. in the 1980s. The final unit on Haitian and Haitian-American texts will open with art by Myrlande Constant, Louisiane Saint Fleurant, Edouard Duval-Carrié, as well as excerpts from Edwidge Danticat’s *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*, the folktale “The Tale of Bouki and Malice” recorded by Jacques Stephen Alexis, and music by Boukman Eksperyans and Emeline Michel. Danticat’s novel focusing on intergenerational trauma and healing, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, will close the unit, along with the film *Vers le sud* (Heading South) directed by Laurent Cantet and based on short stories by Haitian writer Dany Laferrière that focus on sexual tourism in Haiti in the 1970s.

In terms of assessment, I will require students to make daily discussion board posts on the readings. This helps me gain a sense of what students may be interested in, so that I can work it into my lesson plans, and it also gives students who may be too shy to speak up regularly in class an opportunity to share their ideas. 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—to present and discuss with the class in connection with course themes and the assigned readings. I also plan to structure the course according to three written assignments.

The first paper of the course, Reading Literature through Martí, asks students to work both intertextually and transhistorically to use writings by Martí as a lens through which to read contemporary Cuban-American literature. An example I give in the assignment is Pilar’s statement in *Dreaming in Cuban* that art “is the ultimate revolution” (235). How does this concept relate to the relationship between revolution and writing or language in Martí’s texts? I specify that the discussions should center on a particular theme or topic 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. I also require that students contextualize their discussions, leaving space for the particulars of each writer’s situatedness. The second assignment is a short comparative analysis paper that asks

students to draw an insightful, analytic connection between two works with attention paid to both the texts and their contexts. The focus of this essay is a detailed interpretation of a particular theme, symbol, character, or formal/aesthetic technique, but I request that students also be sure expand out, discussing how the parts contribute to the overall effect of the works they select.

This will be my first time giving options for the course's final project beyond a research paper. That will still be a possibility—a final comparative analysis drawing on research—but they can also decide to do a creative project or a translation project. This comparative analysis asks students to select a two or more literary and/or art works to put in conversation with each other. Topics will be grounded in or inspired by any of the works that we have read or engaged with this semester, including the literature, art, music, or film. Another option is an open format project, in whatever genre the students choose, to expand on the readings and discussions from this course. I ask that the projects shed light on an aspect of the material in a new and creative way and should be accompanied by a brief essay reflecting on the work and the connections made. A final option for bilingual and multilingual students is to 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. For this project, the students will select 3-5 poems or 1-3 pages of prose to translate into English. The translator must make choices with poetic license in the attempt to retain not only the meaning but also the style of the original text. Thus, a brief essay explaining those choices should accompany the translation.