

English Honours 2023

Paper Descriptions and Booklist

Paper 1: Literary Theory (Coordinator: Mike Marais)

(Mike Marais, Nomonde Ntsepo, Lynda Spencer)

The first semester of this paper focuses on the linguistic turn, power, the space of ethics, language, violence, and the racialisation and sexualisation of the body. Some of the theorists who will be dealt with in this semester include Saussure, Derrida, Althusser, Foucault, Levinas and Butler. Selected films will be used to ground seminar discussions: the Winterfilm Collective's *Winter Soldier*, Guy Nattiv's *Skin*, Pedro Amodovar's *The Skin I Live In*, Celine Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. In the second semester, the seminars will focus on Constructions of Gender, Sexuality, and Embodied Subjectivities and encompass topics such as Heteronormativity and the Body, Queer Bodies, Disability and the Body, Trauma Theory, Black and African Feminisms, Rereading Black Bodies, the Body and Desire, Consumer Bodies.

The material required for this paper will be made available to students through various means.

Paper 3: American Literature (Coordinator: Aretha Phiri)

(Sam Naidu, Aretha Phiri, Deborah Seddon)

This paper ranges from some of the classic nineteenth-century texts of American literature to the twenty-first century. In the first term, students will engage with and interrogate the formative, democratic ideologies and ideals of the American nation pre- and post-Civil War (1861-1865).

The autobiographical *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) highlights slavery as a fundamental impediment to the attainment of individual and familial life for African Americans, and attests to the incommensurable and exclusory character of the American ideal. Decades later, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) presents a bold critique of American democracy, while also intimating its potential. The novel represents the relationship between a young white boy, Huck Finn, and a runaway slave, Jim, on their journey across the Mississippi River.

In the second term, students focus on the poetry of Emily Dickinson (1830- 1866), widely considered to be one of America's greatest poets. Labelled a Transcendentalist, a late Romantic, a pre-Modernist, and a feminist by scholars, Dickinson was an unconventional and unique individual and poet. Her poetic style and form are idiosyncratic, setting her apart from other poets of her time and since then. This component of the paper will consider Dickinson's portrayal of American life, including her responses to the American Civil War, and will then zoom out to reflect on some of the universal themes of her poetry, including her tragic sense of the brutalities which life imposes on the individual and her philosophical uncertainties about a world which struck her as a place of mystery, ambiguity and obscure horrors.

In the third term, students will examine some seminal texts of the twentieth-century that interrogate the American Dream. Reflecting the anxieties and injustices of post-World War II and anticipating the universally turbulent civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Ralph Ellison's

experimental modernist form, in *The Invisible Man* (1952), explores the mechanisms of America's marginalised subjectivities and existences. Raymond Carver's collection of short stories, *Where I'm Calling From* (1988), extends the theme of disenchantment by focusing on blue-collar, working-class Americans whose mundane lives are fittingly expressed in his minimalist narrative style.

In the fourth term, students encounter 'queer women writing' by examining the lives, poetry, and prose of five of America's finest women writers: Elizabeth Bishop, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Nicky Finney. All five women may be identified as queer, but each has a distinctive way of understanding and articulating the intersection of her personal life with her poetry. Widely regarded as one of the most important poets of the twentieth century, Bishop did not wish to be defined as either "woman" or "lesbian," while Rich defiantly identified herself in deliberate contradistinction to patriarchal norms and to what she described, in an important essay, as the "compulsory heterosexuality" demanded by American culture. In her essay collection, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), Walker articulates a feminism more attuned to the lives and experiences of black women, and Lorde famously identified herself as "black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet," exhibiting an openness about her own personal life that eased the way for younger queer black women writers coming after her. One of these women writers, Finney, won the National Book Award for Poetry in 2011 for poems that reveal a keen attention to the history of African Americans, from the slave past, through the struggle for Civil Rights, to racialised government responses to contemporary human disasters such as Hurricane Katrina.

Semester 1

Term 1: (AP)

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Term 2: (SN)

Emily Dickinson, *Collected Poems of Emily Dickinson*

Semester 2

Term 3: (AP)

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Penguin 9780140287578)

Raymond Carver, *Where I'm Calling From: Selected Stories*

Term 4: (TBC)

Queer Women Writing: Prose and poetry readings to be provided

Paper 4: Global Modernisms (Coordinator: Jamie McGregor)

(Sam Naidu, Deborah Seddon, Jamie McGregor, Sue Marais, Thando Njovane, Mike Marais)

This paper covers wide-ranging and often contrasting literary responses to modernity from the opening years of the twentieth century to the first decades of the twenty-first. The texts on offer also present a remarkable variety of settings, subjects, and styles. Joseph Conrad's infamous novella, *Heart of Darkness* (1902), will be studied mainly for its representation of the relationship between Africa and Europe in the late nineteenth century. Attention will also be paid to the novella's unusual narrative situation, its problematisation of 'truth', its self-reflexivity, its questioning of the role of art and 'civilisation', and its existential themes.

Henry James's *The Ambassadors* (1903) is one of James's late great works and his own favourite of his novels. It follows the experience of the aging American Lambeth Strether, sent to Paris by his fiancé Mrs Newsome, to rescue her son Chad and bring him home to run the family business. While in Paris, Strether falls under the spell of Chad and his circle of friends. His provincial American

worldview breaks down, so much so that he begins to renege on his assignment and rethink his entire life.

Turning to a range of Virginia Woolf's most acclaimed works, the paper continues, first, with *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), a notable early attempt at the stream-of-consciousness narrative subsequently developed in *To the Lighthouse*, but no less remarkable for its evocation of the human connection linking total strangers, despite differences in age, sex, life experience, social class, and even sanity, and also for its scathing indictment of the mental health profession. Woolf's proto-feminist polemic *A Room of One's Own* offers further insights into her fiction, as well as a rare opportunity to appreciate the literary merits of essay writing. Lastly, her most advanced novelistic experiment, *The Waves* (1931), documents the lives of six characters from early childhood to old age as a series of interlinked and overlapping monologues, rendered with extraordinary psychological insight and moving poetic lyricism.

In Manuel Puig's 1976 novel, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, two cellmates in an Argentinian penitentiary converse on a range of topics in order to pass the time. Initially seeming opposites, Molina, a transgender woman (and informant), and Valentin, a political activist, form an intimate bond, and even briefly become lovers – but their developing trust is hazardous, under the circumstances. The novel is deeply experimental, since it consists of a main plot, several sub-plots, paratextual disquisitions on a range of topics, and lengthy paraphrases of the plots of five romantic films that Molina recounts to Valentin. Moreover, readers are confronted throughout with pure dialogue, interspersed with passages of interior monologue, and must decide for themselves who is 'speaking' or 'thinking'.

The third term is reserved for the diurnal urban Hibernian odyssey of James Joyce's sprawling mock-epic *Ulysses* (1922), both parody of Homer and affirmatory human comedy. While its ostensible plot details a single day, 16 June 1904, in the lives of Jewish advertising canvasser Leopold Bloom, his wife Molly, and the young intellectual Stephen Dedalus (from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*), with a large cast of supporting characters (including several first introduced in the stories of Dubliners), the text's encyclopaedic range is perhaps better indicated by each of its eighteen episodes having its own narrative technique and set of symbols (including a dedicated colour, branch of knowledge, and organ of the body). It is also, despite its undoubted challenges to the reader, flowing over with lyricism, humour, and unsurpassed linguistic invention.

After an extra week on Joyce (introducing students to the first page of his 'unreadable' final masterpiece, *Finnegans Wake* (1939), described by a baffled George Bernard Shaw as "utter madness"), the fourth term continues with French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's first novel, *Nausea* (1938), a now classic expression of mid-twentieth century disgust and disillusionment at the perceived banality and emptiness of life.

At one point in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004), Sonmi-451 reflects that "Our lives are not our own. From womb to tomb, we are bound to others, past and present. And by each crime and every kindness, we birth our future." Our reading of this novel will reflect on its critique of the violence concomitant on Western notions of autonomous subjectivity and its invitation to its readers to try and "inhabit the alterity of the other". We will also reflect on this text's preoccupation with the unsaid and unsayable, with that which exceeds its own paradigms of understanding.

Since modernist fiction is grounded in an epistemological crisis, it is hardly surprising that one of its principal concerns has been negotiating conceptual room for those whom we fail to know. Our

reading of *Warlight* (2018) will focus on Michael Ondaatje's development of the modernist work of unknowing in this text.

Semester 1:

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (SN)

Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (DS)

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (JM)

-----, *A Room of One's Own* (JM)

-----, *The Waves* (JM)

Manuel Puig, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (SM)

Semester 2:

James Joyce, *Ulysses* (JM)

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (TN)

David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (MM)

Michael Ondaatje, *Warlight* (MM)

Paper 5: Africa in the World (Coordinator: Sam Naidu)

(Sam Naidu, Thando Njovane, Deborah Seddon, Lynda Spencer)

Term 1: 21st Century African Diasporas (SN)

This component of the paper will focus on literature which represents contemporary African diasporic experiences. Of particular interest are the different modes of representation, the relationship between Africa/Africans and the world (the diasporic homes), and the impact of increasing transnationalism or globalisation on so-called African identities and cultures. To begin we will look at Jonny Steinberg's *Little Liberia: An African Odyssey in New York*. This text, a hybrid of history, reportage and personal biographies, describes the Liberian diasporic community which exists in the Park Hill neighbourhood of Staten Island, New York. Steinberg's multi-faceted story is a poignant comment on war-torn Liberia, the migrants who are forced to flee its brutal civil war, and the troubled relationship between America and West Africa. We then move onto Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's latest novel, *Americanah*, which is a humorous, transnational, intergenerational epic tale about the experiences of Nigerian immigrants in America and the UK, and the exigencies of their return to the homeland. We will also look at Igbo-Tamil author, Akwaeke Emezi's debut novel, *Freshwater*, which explores various forms of border-crossing. In addition to reading and discussing the prescribed texts, you will be expected to: familiarise yourself with relevant theories; compare and contrast creative non-fiction with fiction; and, present research papers in seminars.

In addition to reading and discussing the prescribed texts, you will be expected to familiarise yourself with relevant theories and present research papers in seminars.

Primary Texts

Jonny Steinberg, *Little Liberia: An African Odyssey in New York* [out of print, we will make a plan]

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah*

Akwaeke Emezi, *Freshwater*

Term 2: The Contemporary African Novel (TN)

In this component of the paper, we examine a variety of contemporary African novels in relation to issues of form. While the African novel has tended to be predominantly realist, however, recent

novels have taken a more experimental approach, ranging from variations on the epic tradition to meditations on a postapocalyptic Africa. As a result, this module traces the trajectory of these experimental forms in relation to their intertexts and the traditions in which each of the selected novels is steeped. We begin by reading Peter Kimani's *Dance of the Jakaranda* as a historical novel which not only gestures towards its colonial predecessor, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, but also opens up a conversation about the possibilities of writing which may be regarded as African epics. This is followed by a reading of A. Igoni Barrett's *Blackass* and Alain Mabanckou's *African Psycho*, both of which borrow from Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* and Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis", respectively. These intertexts therefore grant us a point of entry into the entanglements between the African novel and world literature.

Primary Texts

Peter Kimani, *Dance of the Jakaranda*

A. Igoni Barrett, *Blackass*

Alain Mabanckou, *African Psycho*

Term 3: Irates of the Caribbean (TBC)

The Caribbean was one of the earliest sites of European colonialism and slavery. The focus of this component will be on how literature and ideas generated from, or about, the Caribbean, function in the global imaginary. We will begin with three texts by a giant of Afro-Caribbean literature, Aimé Césaire: first, *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal (Notebook of a Return to My Native Land)* (1939), written as Césaire determined to leave Europe for his native Martinique. As Césaire attempts to forge a new poetic language adequate to his own experience, his poem gives voice to his influential notion of "Negritude": a philosophy and aesthetic that continues to have resonance and wide-ranging influence on African and African-American conceptions of identity and literature. We will read *Notebook* alongside Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955), which contains the key ideas of Césaire's political thought, some of which later inspired the writing of Frantz Fanon, who was Césaire's pupil in Martinique. As the African-American historian Robin Kelley suggests, *Discourse on Colonialism* is rather like "a historical prose poem" and articulates "a poetics of anticolonialism." We will then turn to an English translation of *Une Tempête* (1969), Césaire's French language reworking of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, as a starting point to examine the connections between Shakespeare's play and the many rewritings and responses it has generated. The *Tempest* has long been claimed by postcolonial thinkers as a canonical work that enables them to confront their entangled history. It is recognized as early modernity's most extensive engagement with the vexing issues of colonialism – race, dispossession, language, displacement, occupation, and European disregard for other cultures. Lastly, we will explore Toni Morrison's novel *Tar Baby* (1981), which is a complex engagement with Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as well as the African-American folktale of the tar baby appropriated by Joel Chandler Harris in his Uncle Remus stories. Into the isolated setting of a fictional Caribbean island, Morrison brings together a cast of characters who represent a microcosm of the gendered and racial stratifications of contemporary American society. Setting her novel in the Caribbean, however, allows Morrison to take into full account how such disparities of power function on a global level, particularly between the global south and the world's overdeveloped nations.

Primary Texts

Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*. Translated by Mireille Rosello with Ann Pritchard, Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 1995.

Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*. Translated by Joan Pinkham, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000.

Aimé Césaire, *A Tempest*. Translated by Richard Miller, New York: TCG Translations, 2002.

William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*. Edited by Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan, London: Arden, 2000.

Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby*. London: Vintage, 1981.

Term 4: Wartime women: Revisiting war in narratives by Eastern African Women Writers (LS)

This component looks at two novels by contemporary Eastern Africa women writers who inhabit two worlds, Maaza Mengiste (Ethiopia/ USA) and Nadifa Mohamed (Somaliland/ Britain). These worlds provide them with a unique perspective on the traumatic intersection of history and everyday experience, the impact of tradition and modernity on the body, the contradictions, tensions and ambivalences of the gendered experience. As part of the Africa in the World paper, this section aims to introduce students to Eastern Africa imaginaries and women's narratives of war. These revisionist accounts of war are an attempt to reclaim women's voices from the margins of history and foreground their contribution during war, while underscoring the various forms of agency and resistance that women take on. Some of the questions raised by these revisionist narratives include: how do the authors reflect on the experiences of the individual, the family unit and the community? How do the writers represent the experience of violence and the disintegration of the home and the nation-state? Do these narratives reveal how and why do women construct new forms of agency during times of repression? We will draw on historical, postcolonial theories, African and transnational feminisms, to understand theories of the everyday, experiences of war and repressive regimes.

Primary Texts

Maaza Mengiste, *The Shadow King*

Nadifa Mohamed, *The Orchard of Lost Souls*

Paper 6: South African Imaginings of Place (Coordinator: Aretha Phiri)

(Kimmera Pillay, Nomonde Ntsepo, Aretha Phiri)

Term 1: Identity, Community and Place: (Re-)Inventing Our Selves/Ourselves in the "Storm Years" (KP)

At this moment of transformation in the country ... what we hope for is not so much fictions which imagine the future in detail, but narrative structures that embrace choice or, if you will, stories that juggle and mix generic options. (Elleke Boehmer)

In the context of the climate of anticipation that occurred in South Africa in the early nineties, and particularly the hope emanating from many quarters that, in the future, "better writing ... which registers response to a decentred and less symbolically simplified society" (Cornwell 17) would emerge, it is significant that a number of critics were identifying texts that had already appeared in the eighties as emblematic of this shift in direction – such as Njabulo Ndebele's *Fools and Other Stories* (1983), Zoë Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987), and Ivan Vladislavić's *Missing Persons* (1989). Their assessment was premised not only on the texts' treatment of the politically vexed issue of identity in this country and their refusal to be constrained by the reiteration of "an epistemology in which reality is conceived purely in terms of a total polarity of opposites" (Ndebele 58), but also on their adoption of a reflexive mode of narration and innovative use of generically

hybrid formats. In this opening section of the course, we shall focus on why these texts' representations of the intersections between identity, community and place might be viewed as capturing or perhaps heralding a new sense of this nexus at the time they were produced – a especially intransigent decade in this country's history.

Primary Texts

Njabulo Ndebele, *Fools and Other Stories*.

Zoë Wicomb, *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*.

Ivan Vladislavić, *Flashback Hotel*.

Term 2: Intimate Spaces (NN)

In this component of the paper, we examine the configuration of the home in anti-apartheid and post-apartheid writing. We read the home as a site in which broader political questions of labour and love are engaged on an intimate, personal level, blurring the distinctions between public and private, past and present, home and elsewhere.

Primary Texts

Sindiwe Magona, selected short stories from *Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night*. Interlink Book, 1991 (material to be provided).

Zoë Wicomb, selected short stories from *The One that Got Away*. The New Press, 2009 (material to be provided).

Yewande Omotoso, *The Woman Next Door*. Random House, 2016.

Term 3: Apartheid landscapes (AP)

Examining selected autobiographies, memoirs, as well as meditations, short stories and essays of prominent Drum writers of the 1950s Sophiatown generation, this section explores their concerns with situated and exilic restlessness, the interracial frontiers and unreal realities of apartheid landscapes.

Primary Texts

Nat Nakasa, *The World of Nat Nakasa* (Ed. Essop Patel). Picador, 2007.

William 'Bloke' Modisane, *Blame Me on History*. Simon and Schuster, 1990.

Bessie Head, *The Cardinals: With Meditations and Short Stories*. Heinemann Educational Books, 1995.

Term 4: Home and dislocation (KP)

Home and dislocation. [. . .] Building and demolition. Roots and rootlessness. No wonder we are given to extremes of behaviour. In between is a void. They have a long history, these extremes of behaviour. Is a country of so much dislocation a home? Winnie, there were many who hoped that the sight of you and Nelson walking hand-in-hand down the street would represent the beginning of the reconciliation of extremes; the end of dislocation. (Njabulo Ndebele, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* 68)

This section attempts to address the question "Is a country of so much dislocation a home?" It focuses on three post-apartheid texts, two of which are fictional, and one a blend of history, cultural ecology and personal memoir. In each, various experiences of 'unhomedness' are confronted. We shall examine the extent to which these texts interrogate the notion of a "reconciliation of

extremes” and an “end [to] dislocation” in the ‘disenchanted democracy’ that is South Africa today, and what the texts have to offer in terms of prognoses for the future.

Primary Texts

Njabulo Ndebele, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*. Revised ed. Pan Macmillan, 2013.

Ivan Vladislavić, *Double Negative*. Umuzi, 2011.

Jacklyn Cock, *Writing the Ancestral River*. Wits UP, 2018

