

Cornell-English Department-PS Sample

After reading *Beloved* as an undergraduate, I was left breathless by the revelation that history had never been separate from the present. The interplay of mourning and melancholia in the novel far exceeded Sethe's family, insisting that an entire nation, myself included, come to terms with certain ghosts. Now, as I finish my Master's degree at the University of Virginia, I am able to name that type of linguistic power; the return of the ghost as haunted history is recognized by William Faulkner's observation "the past is never dead. It's not even past," as well as in Jacques Derrida's conception of hauntology. Given the African American imperative of the importance of the past and the strength of UVa's American specialization, I have been able to follow through on a focus of the 20th and 21st centuries with special emphasis on memory in marginalized, multi-ethnic literature and culture, African American studies, and on issues of race, gender and region across two centuries.

In a recent issue of *PMLA*, David Damrosch suggests that we "open up new avenues of comparison within our putatively national languages and within the borders of the often multilingual nations we discuss. For the study of English literature today, we need a comparative English literature as much as we need a global comparative literature." Midway through my studies, I experienced an epiphany in a course on the Global Novel where I encountered works like Junot Diaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*. I was struck by the way these American authors on a far-flung global novel syllabus did not just engage in 'hauntology,' but also grappled with questions of translation, history, and the self/Other in ways that complicated national histories, language, and identity. As an Americanist dedicated to transnational and inter-American cultural/narrative exchange, I realized my focus would fall within Damrosch's proposed field if his comparative English were converted to a comparative American literature. What, for example, does Chimamanda Adichie tell us when an Igbo-American immigrant provides dual British/American English definitions for words in "The Arrangers of Marriage"? How does Diaz recast Latino *machismo* in the United States with inventive English and Spanish? I hope not only to orient my interrogations of 'American' subjectivity toward transnational/anti-imperialist imperatives, but also to contrast and explore the multivalent discourses of English in the United States. I believe we can

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theorize ever-shifting hybrid ‘American’ identity and language against the backdrop of a global paradigm by examining how certain American literature demonstrates the very otherness of America as well as what the myriad cultures and heteroglossia of those who are born in or immigrate to America reveal about ‘Americanness’.

Adding to my targeted immersion in American literary genres and perspectives at UVa, then, has been my coverage of such global theorists as Paul Jay and Arjun Appadurai; courses in postcolonial women’s writing have exposed me to classic works with a strong relevance to transnational American literature, from Edward Said and James Clifford to such specifically Americanist considerations in the scholarship of Wai-Chee Dimock and Vera Kutzinski. Among the areas I hope to hone further in doctoral studies are writers of the Global South, where Faulkner would have pride of place, and to continue my work on contemporary American literature that involves media forms like the graphic novel, where Americans such as Alison Bechdel have pioneered a form which, as Marianne Hirsch has observed, opens up a “biocularity” of imagistic as well as narrative storytelling.

The unusually rich opportunities at UVa to pursue African American studies have led to my MA thesis in this area. My thesis, entitled “The Scandal of Memory: Sally Hemings and Centuries of American Discourse,” and directed by Professor Deborah McDowell, reads William Wells Brown’s *Clotel*, Barbara Chase-Riboud’s *Sally Hemings: A Novel*, and the ABC television series *Scandal* as a cultural memory manifesting across hundreds of years of scandalous stories that may redistribute power among characters with the changing shape of American politics, but whose representation of the Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings dyad reflects an indictment of American democracy. I explore how this narrative plays out as a coded reversal of the suppressed Hemings story, as well as how racialized struggles can be one of the most globally attractive aspects of the United States as an exporter of mass media. While my thesis is devoted an African American arc, it draws on my interest in melding genres, media, and modes around a set of questions that have to do with cultural persistence and translation in narrative. I also had the opportunity to serve as the course grader for Professor Lisa Woolfork’s course African American Literature II, which gave me invaluable teaching experience. In addition, I was chosen as the summer intern for University and Community Action for Racial Equity (UCARE). To my delight, as an intern I was charged with planning a fall conference on Universities and Race Histories. As well as teaching for

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Professor Woolfork, I have gained significant pedagogical and professional experience at UVa. I taught a summer course through the Curry School that was dedicated to my own interests in contemporary media, “The History and Politics of Zines as Alternative Print Culture”, and was asked to lecture on the topic in a course on “Political Resistance in Writing” the following semester. I gave a paper this fall at the University of Maryland Women’s Studies Conference on post-Hurricane Katrina narratives of empowerment. This spring, I will present at the University of Georgia English graduate conference on a panel I proposed and am chairing, where I will discuss global memory as narrative in relation to racialized maternity for *A Mercy* and *Salvage the Bones*.

The exceptional strengths of Cornell’s English department would allow me to extend my knowledge of minority and transnational American literatures and further my purchase on critical, gender, and narrative theory as well as cultural studies. Even so, my focus remains in development, and doctoral studies at Cornell will serve me well to clarify, adjust, or even redirect my critical interests. Professor Margo Crawford’s specialization in African American and comparative ethnic literature resonate with my interest in African American as well as race, gender, and sexuality studies, while Professor Kate McCullough’s work in American and women’s literature would be an ideal fit with my interest in feminist and queer theory. Above all, the department’s curricular depth in American and minority/third world literary studies, its eminence in critical theory, and its investment in interdisciplinary perspectives offer a particularly fruitful environment for doctoral studies in minority and transnational American literature and culture.

In closing, I hope to become an Americanist who explores 20th and 21st century literature as it relates to the world as a whole, and to its own margins. My commitment to teaching, demonstrated by my service as a course grader and summer employment as an instructor, will enable me to thrive as a PhD candidate at Cornell. Ultimately, I would like to address in my own scholarship and present in my classroom work that continues to take my breath away and to share the urgency and excitement that originally sparked my own academic revelation.

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