

The Sources of Western Civilization II: Postcolonial Writing, Between the Nation and Relation

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Course Description

Modern Western civilization has largely defined itself by its colonial relationship with other peoples—this is the major thesis argued by Edward Said, generally considered the founding theorist of Postcolonialism. Postcolonial theory has since tried to come to grips with the changing cultural relationship between the West and its former colonies in the contemporary global age. This seminar is a selected survey of the history of Postcolonial writing, both fictional and theoretical, across the 20th century and into the 21st. As we move across the 1900s and from European male writers to African, women, and immigrant writers, we will consider various attitudes and strategies advocated by authors who are all, apparently, working toward a goal of overcoming the legacy of European colonialism in Africa, in the Americas, and in Europe itself. At the two poles of these attitudes are nationalism and cosmopolitanism. As Franz Fanon argues in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the nation serves as a site of resistance to colonial structures, allowing its citizens to reclaim their individual dignity and cultural particularity against a long history of suppression. Postcolonial cosmopolitanism, on the other hand, envisions the disintegration of such national borders (generally drawn along Western colonial lines) in favor of a radically nonhierarchical, “relational” world that embraces differences. Our task in this seminar is to evaluate—and complicate—the often-fraught relationship between these two viewpoints in light of modern essayists, poets, fiction writers, and filmmakers responding to the West’s colonial project. Particular themes will include the transitional and problematic writing of late-colonialism, Italian colonization of North Africa, the late appearance in Italy of heterogeneous voices, the place and role of African American literature in the United States, the current sociopolitical atmosphere in the United States, and the current immigrant ‘crisis’ in Europe and Italy as the symbolic gateway. Finally, the course will look at the concept of World Literature and its ontological role in modern humanist studies. As Johann Wolfgang von Goethe said in 1827:

“I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men. ... I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.”

Course Objectives

This seminar will challenge its participants to gain the following competencies:

- 1) Connect the close reading of texts with broader critical thinking about colonial history and its legacy in the present day;
- 2) Take an informed and critical position on the significance of common binary oppositions like North/South, West/non-West, First World/Third World, particular/universal, and local/global;
- 3) Become conversant in several major anti-colonial or postcolonial cultural movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries;

4) Develop speaking and writing skills through classroom presentations and essays, with the goal of using these discursive practices not simply to present a readymade argument but as an intellectual tool to deepen reflection upon a topic.

Readings: Reading assignments add up to about 30-40 pages each week, with some variation according to the density of the texts. Students are expected to read each text thoroughly—more than once if needed—and arrive in class prepared to participate actively in discussions on the texts in the broader theoretical framework of the course.

Evaluation: Students will be evaluated according to the following criteria, weighted by percentage:

Essays: 60%

- Essay 1 – 15%
- Essay 2 – 15%
- Final Essay – 30%

Presentations: 25%

- Opening: 10%
- In-class position statement: 15%

Participation: 15%

Presentations—Openings and Position Statements: Beginning after the introductory session/s, each seminar meeting will contain two student presentations: one opening and one position statement, explained below. Each student will do each of these tasks once during the semester.

The opening occurs at the very beginning of the period. The student will read aloud a short excerpt from an assigned text for that period, followed by a five- or seven-minute commentary on the text. The purpose is to begin the discussion for the period by identifying several key questions and locating the source of those questions in the assigned text. This is not an exhaustive analysis.

The position statement occurs in the middle of the period. The presenter will speak for about ten minutes, taking a stance on how one of the key themes of the course is (or is not) borne out by an assigned text. This differs from the opening in its argumentation: rather than identifying questions to be taken up later, the position statement advances a particular thematic or formal argument and generally encompasses a larger portion of the text in question.

Written Assignments: Written assignments will be double spaced with standard margins. Throughout the semester, they will include two essays of 3-4 pages, and a final essay of 5 pages. Students are expected to follow a proper citation style. Plagiarism is strictly prohibited.

Consultation: Students are encouraged to contact the instructor with any questions about seminar material or assignments. In-person meetings may occur during the instructor's office hours, TBA.

Intellectual Property: Unless otherwise noted, the content of all lectures and supplementary materials (e.g. activity handout, synopses, agendas) provided by the instructor are his intellectual property.

Index of Texts:

Primary Readings

- Angelou, Maya
 “Still I Rise” [1978]
 “Human Family” [1990]
Coates, Ta-Nehisi, *Between the World and Me* [2015]
Conrad, Joseph, *The Heart of Darkness* [1899]
Flaiano, Ennio, *Time to Kill* (Tempo di uccidere) [1947] [Selections]
Ghermandi, Gabriella, *Queen of Flowers and Pearls* [2007] [Selections]
Khouma, Pap, *I Was an Elephant Salesman* [1990] [Selections]

Secondary Readings

- Achebe, Chinua, “An Image of Africa” [1977]
Bhabha, Homi, “Forward” in *Black Skin White Masks* [1986]
Damrosch, David, “Frames for World Literature” [2003]
Fanon, Frantz, *Black Skin White Masks* [1952] [selections]
Lombardi-Diop, Cristina, “Postracial/Postcolonial Italy” [2012]
Loomba, Ania
 “Defining the Terms: Colonialism, Imperialism, Neo-Colonialism, Postcolonialism”
 “Colonial and Postcolonial Identities” [1998]
Parati, Graziella, “Introduction” [2010] to *I Was an Elephant Salesman*
Re, Lucia, “Italy's first postcolonial novel and the end of (neo)realism” [2017]
Said, Edward, “Two Visions in *Heart of Darkness*” [1993]
Young, Robert, “World Literature and Postcolonialism” [2012]

Seminar Schedule

Part I: Introduction to Colonialism & Postcolonial Studies

September 11: Course introduction

Loomba, “Defining the Terms: Colonialism, Imperialism, Neo-Colonialism, Postcolonialism” pp. 7-21

Additional event of interest: Martin Puchner, “World Literature: The Curious History of an Idea” Wennan Building 116, 7-9pm

September 18: Conrad, *The Heart of Darkness* (Chapter I) pp. 1-37

Said, “Two Visions in *Heart of Darkness*” in *Culture and Imperialism* pp. 19-31

September 25: Conrad, *The Heart of Darkness* (Chapter II) pp. 38-67

October 2: NO CLASS

October 9: Conrad, *The Heart of Darkness* (Chapter III) pp. 68-96

Achebe, “An Image of Africa” pp. 1-21

Part II: Intro to Colonialism & Postcolonial Studies in Italy, the 'Gateway to Europe'

- October 16: Flaiano, *Time to Kill*, pp. 7-37
Lombardi-Diop "Postracial/Postcolonial Italy", pp. 175-186
Additional material of interest: [In Africa It's Another Story](#)
[ESSAY 1 DUE](#)
- October 23: Flaiano, *Time to Kill*, pp. 37-55
Re, "Italy's first postcolonial novel and the end of (neo)realism", pp. 417-432
- October 30: Flaiano, *Time to Kill*, pp. 56-84 & 122-131
Fanon, "Introduction" to *Black Skin White Masks*, pp. 1-7

Part III: "Voices to Represent Ourselves," New European Perspectives

- November 6: Ghermandi, *Queen of Flowers and Pearls*, Chapter 1, pp. 1-35
Bhabha, "Forward" in *Black Skin White Masks*, pp. xxi-xxxviii
- November 13: Ghermandi, *Queen of Flowers and Pearls*, Chapter 1, pp. 35-62
Fanon, "The Negro and Language", pp. 8-28
- November 20: Ghermandi, *Queen of Flowers and Pearls*, 118-127; 206-through 3rd paragraph of 239; 268-271
[ESSAY 2 DUE](#)

Part IV: "Voices to Represent Ourselves," New American Perspectives

- November 27: Coates, *Between the World and Me*, Chapter 1, pp. 6-42
Angelou, "Still I Rise" [1978]
- December 4: Coates, *Between the World and Me*, Chapter 2, pp. 43-75
Angelou, "Human Family" [1990]
- December 11: Coates, *Between the World and Me*, Chapter 3, pp. 76-86
Loomba, "Colonial and Postcolonial Identities" pp. 91-106

Part V: Between Minor Literature and World Literature

- December 18: Khouma, *I Was an Elephant Salesman*, pp. 1-30
Parati, "Introduction", pp. xi-xv
Young, "World Literature and Postcolonialism", pp. 213-221
- December 25: Khouma, *I Was an Elephant Salesman*, pp. 31-63
Damrosch, "Frames for World Literature", pp. 496-513
- January 1: NO CLASS

FINAL ESSAY DUE BY JANUARY 7TH