

English 240: Caribbean Literature

❖ *Read this long and intimidating document and thoroughly familiarize yourself with its contents.* ❖

As they used to say on the old cop show "Dragnet": Ignorance of the law is no excuse.

Goals

The Caribbean has occupied a prime place in the Anglo-American literary unconscious at least as far back as Shakespeare's *Tempest*. In recompense, perhaps, the Western establishment—in the quinquennial year of Columbus's arrival in the Americas, no less—recognized the Caribbean's *own* literary achievement by awarding the Nobel Prize for literature to St. Lucian poet and playwright Derek Walcott. (Nine years later, in 2001, the award went to Trinidadian novelist V. S. Naipaul.) Some skeptics found these gestures "Eurocentric": what really got Walcott noticed by the Swedish Academy, they suspected, was his book-length poem *Omeros*, a recasting of Homer's *Odyssey*. Naipaul, meanwhile, has built a reputation for pandering to Western stereotypes about the hopelessly dysfunctional "Third World." But even if the Swedes' laurels were unconsciously narcissistic, North Americans' attitudes towards the Caribbean are scarcely less self-involved. In the U.S. popular imagination, the Caribbean is primarily a cold-weather tourist destination full of white-sand beaches, chocolate-skinned bathing beauties, shiny-happy steel drummers, and snappily-dressed waiters bearing trays of rum—and maybe, at a stretch, a few dreadlocked Rastas smoking spliffs and chanting down "Babylon." Part of the project of a class like ours, then, is to complicate the identities that have been manufactured for the Caribbean by the media and the tourism industry. We can begin that work by becoming aware of the ways in which West Indian writers have worked for many decades now to forge a uniquely Caribbean aesthetic, one that draws upon oral and scribal traditions drawn from diverse legacies—African, European, South Asian, Amerindian—mixing and shaping them into something new. We can further it by giving the nod not just to international superstars like Walcott and Naipaul, but to the scores of other less well-known wordsmiths and creative artists of the Caribbean and the Caribbean diaspora. Collectively speaking, theirs is one of the most significant bodies of work to have transformed the world's conception of "English" in the post-colonial era, and I think it absolutely demands the attention of anyone claiming to specialize in English-language literature.

Work

There will be times—sometimes entire classes—when I'll need to lecture at you, perform some show-and-tell, or plant some idea or other in your head. But for the most part, I expect you to be enthusiastic learners who are willing to explore this territory both independently and coöperatively. Here's one way how: on six occasions of your choice (out of nine opportunities), you'll post a response to the week's assigned texts to one of a series of Moodle discussion forums. I'm aware that your insane schedules, among other things, can rob such an old-school "social medium" of its full potential for knowledge-pooling and community-building. Still, this is one of the best technologies I know of for gathering your thoughts and beginning to articulate them. So, erm...what exactly do I mean by a "response"? Look for a separate, long-winded handout. For now, let me stick to logistics:

On those occasions when you choose to write a response, **you must post it to the appropriate forum no later than 8:00 p.m. on the dates specified in the calendar** (below), so that other folks have a fighting chance of digesting it—or at least tasting it—before the following day's class. I recommend composing in Word, then copying and pasting into Moodle. (Don't simply upload an attachment; not everyone will be able to open it.) For safety's sake, save a copy of your work locally *and* print out a hard copy for yourself—even bring that copy with you to refer to in class. Unless there's been a system-wide network failure or a documented problem with your Internet provider or in your computer lab, late responses will count against you. Failure to make six responses may result in a failing grade.

Each response should be *at least* 400 words. (See the aforementioned handout for details.) Since this requirement is aimed first and foremost at getting you to think out loud, without undue pressure or judgment, about challenging and sometimes provocative texts, I will normally just read each post and silently award you credit (assuming it's credit-worthy)—unless you specifically ask me to respond to you personally about the substance of your work.

Collectively, these responses—which may be stylistically informal, but which should still be thoughtful and considered, not slapdash—may constitute freestanding, parallel discussions to those we have in class, especially if enough people build the momentum to carry them along. (I hope some of you will be motivated enough to do so of your own volition, but if you're stirred by grades, you can guarantee yourself a boost of at least $\frac{1}{3}$ of a grade on any given response by making a follow-up post, preferably in reaction to someone else's first post, before the next forum opens. Again: details on the handout.) But even if a genuine online discussion fails to erupt, taking the trouble to work your amorphous gut reactions into on-screen ideas will still give you some ready-made material to draw on in class.

As I say, there's no guarantee that any of these things will get used in class, though it'll be nice to have 'em on hand. Occasionally I may bring the forums into the classroom, using your on-line responses as starting points for in-class discussion. But I'm mostly interested in having you put in the care and attention required to cook them up. A class session can be a lot more interesting, however, if you've had a chance to read, hash over, and maybe even respond to what other folks are thinking *before* you all sit down in a room together. To that end, *everyone* should try to at least glance at other folks' posts before class. (Believe me, you'll often find some brilliant ideas there.)

I will often post reading or study questions to Moodle to help you get started. You, meanwhile, should always feel free to log on and make a spontaneous post of any length, at any time, even if you're not doing so for credit: gripes, questions, objections or clarifications; remarks about something someone did or didn't say in class; afterthoughts or second thoughts about the texts; etc.—it's all fair game. Lively, even heated, debate is fine. Just don't get personal or abusive, and make sure you keep a civil tongue.

So, to enumerate your basic responsibilities (and how they count towards your final grade) more precisely:

1. Regular attendance. To contribute to a good discussion (and to get anything *out* of one), you've got to *be here*. So don't cut a lot of class: we'll miss you, there's no telling what *you'll* miss, and your grade will suffer. I will pass around a sign-in sheet at the beginning of each session, and you should make sure you've initialed it. You're entitled to miss four (4) classes to cover all the contingencies of life, serious or trivial—no explanations, no apologies, no penalties (though a courtesy e-mail is always welcome, and it's up to you to figure out what you missed and to know what's on tap for the next meeting). More than that will begin to hurt. Routine absences should not include days when major assignments are due. If I notice that you've missed more than six classes (that's 20% of the course), I will strenuously encourage you to withdraw, assuming that's still possible. Finally: please get to class on time, don't wander in and out, don't spend your time texting, Facebooking, or web-surfing, and don't leave early. (~ **10%** of your course grade.)
2. Careful and on-time reading of assignments, at least six (6) informal written responses to what you've studied (as outlined above, and according to the calendar below), and active engagement in the collective talk that ensues. In addition to writing, that is, you need to do your small part to start up discussions and keep them going—to show some degree of intelligence, inquisitiveness and enthusiasm, both in responding to one another and to the materials on the table, and in helping to control the direction and flow of the conversation. In a class of twenty-odd people, you may be able to get away with being relatively quiet and shy, but you can't be absolutely anonymous. (~ **40%**.)

3. Successful completion of a short “research-paper-in-a-box.” I’ll provide a very specific template for you to follow in gathering, sorting, compiling, and evaluating information about a Caribbean writer we’re not studying in class. The finished product will be something under 10 pages. Details to follow later in the semester. (~ **25%**.)
4. A final project, which *may* turn out to be (groan) group project. I’m currently considering several options that differ in scope and complexity but all comprise elements of research and digital technology. One involves allusions in *The Arrivants* (one of our major texts), another involves compiling biographical, bibliographic and critical information on a younger contemporary Caribbean poet. Platforms vary. Details “soon come,” as they say in the Caribbean. (~ **25%**.)

We can/will talk more about any of these requirements, as/if we need to, as the semester progresses.

Texts

Since this is an introductory survey of a rather large field, the reading list is correspondingly heavy. There are eight books you should procure at the HSU bookstore or wherever else you can find them:

- C.L.R. James, *Minty Alley* (UP of Mississippi)
- Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (Longman)
- George Lamming, *In the Castle of My Skin* (U of Michigan P)
- V.S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* (Penguin)
- Derek Walcott, *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (Noonday/FSG)
- Kamau Brathwaite, *The Arrivants* (Oxford UP)
- Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy* (Farrar)
- Earl Lovelace, *The Dragon Can’t Dance* (Longman)

Together these will take a bite out of your wallet, even though most of them are relatively short. If you’re strapped for cash, try local and/or online used booksellers such as Half.com or ABEBooks.com, check the library, share a book or two with a friend, or ask me if I have an extra copy to lend you. *PLEASE* don’t opt to “sit out” a book because you can’t afford to buy it.

Two other texts,

- “*Iere Now and Long Ago*”: *A Century of Calypso in Trinidad* (required) and
 - *Word Sound Have Power: An Introduction to Dub Poetry* (optional/recommended),
- are multimedia anthologies that I (will) have put together and made available on my website.

Finally, there’s an online Course Reader (a collection of short stories, poems, essays, and essential background reading, much of it required, some recommended) that’s also accessible *only* via the class web page—*not* Oncores or Moodle). Since much of what’s in the Reader is copyrighted, and since publishers have assailed and undermined the idea of the “Fair Use” for educational purposes, you’ll be prompted to enter a username and a password (both on the copy of this syllabus you received in class) to see it. Many of the materials there reflect my conviction that it’s important to put imaginative writing into dialogue with other kinds of writing—critical, theoretical, expository—in whose light our primary texts will make a different kind of sense.

Miscellany

Communication: I will post official communiqués (study questions, schedule changes, afterthoughts or announcements I forgot to make in class, etc.) on the course “Updates” page, which you should get in the habit of monitoring regularly. I will make every effort to publish any updates by 8:00 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays. Information on the Updates page *always* trumps the syllabus. If *you* have something for general distribution to the class, feel free to send it to me, and I’ll post it there.

Grades: Here's where the oppressive substructure of my seemingly benign classroom shows through. I try to go by the book, which was written in the days before rampant grade inflation: "A" is reserved for exceptionally, stunningly well-written, well-spoken and insightful stuff. "B" signifies extra-ordinary—work that goes beyond mere course requirements, qualitatively speaking. "C" is standard and normal; it meets the minimum requirements in every way. "D" is worthy of credit but substandard, and we all know what "F" means. If you're taking the class CR/NC, you need the equivalent of a "C" to pass. I don't expect to give any incompletes.

With few exceptions, I will read and respond to everything you turn in and put a grade on your formal written work, and I'll happily meet with you at any time to talk about your progress and prospects. If a personal disaster befalls you in the course of the semester—your home burns down, your computer crashes, a marauding horde carries off your livestock—please don't be embarrassed, and don't just disappear: let me know, and as soon as humanly possible. At the very least, I can direct you to campus resources that may help, and together we may be able to devise a plan to get you through the semester in one piece. I don't guarantee that I can accommodate every unexpected turn of events; you should also be prepared to withdraw from one or more courses, or from the university entirely, if the situation is dire enough. But there are sometimes contingency plans that can be put into effect if students alert their faculty promptly of personal crises that threaten to interfere with their academic performance.

As for more routine problems: if you're getting behind in the class, feeling as though you're not "getting" something, or just having an intangible problem either mild or severe, *don't sit around fretting and cowering: come and talk to me without delay.*

Disabilities: Please let me know of any documented disabilities and recommended accommodations that would promote your success in this class.

Plagiarism: I take academic dishonesty *very* seriously. Passing off part or all of someone else's words or ideas as your own will result—at the very least—in a failing grade for the course. The university definition of and policies regarding academic dishonesty can be found in the HSU catalog. Please be aware that plagiarism and other forms of dishonesty can result in expulsion from the University.

FOR ADDITIONAL COURSE POLICIES AND OTHER MORE GENERAL INFORMATION (ON CLASSROOM ETIQUETTE, MINIMUM OUTSIDE PREPARATION REQUIRED FOR THIS COURSE, PLAGIARISM & ACADEMIC DISHONESTY, DETAILED DISABILITY ACCOMMODATION, SEXUAL HARASSMENT & DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR, SAFETY INFORMATION, ETC.) LAID OUT IN EVEN MORE EXCRUCIATING DETAIL, SEE THE "COURSE POLICIES AND SYLLABUS ADDENDA" PAGE ONLINE AT
[HTTP://USERS.HUMBOLDT.EDU/MSELDRIDGE/ENGL240B/240BPOLICIES.HTM](http://users.humboldt.edu/mseldrige/ENGL240B/240BPOLICIES.HTM)
IT IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF ALL STUDENTS TO READ AND UNDERSTAND THIS INFORMATION.

CALENDAR

(Danger! Highly volatile—schedule, deadlines, and assigned readings subject to change!
Please consult the course "Updates" page for most current information.)

Aug. 25 & 27	T: Introductions & housekeeping. Th: Where "Caribbean Lit" comes from.
Sep. 1 & 3	<i>The middle class goes slumming.</i> T: C. L. R. James, <i>Minty Alley</i> (reading response due Mon. 8/31) Course Reader: DeLisser Th: <i>Minty Alley</i> , cont'd.
Sep. 8 & 10	<i>Exodus and "Boom."</i> T: Sam Selvon, <i>The Lonely Londoners</i> (reading response due Mon. 9/7) Course Reader: Bennett, "Colonization in Reverse" Recommended Reserve reading on Creole language and Caribbean Lit Th: <i>Lonely Londoners</i> , cont'd.

Sep. 15 & 17	T: George Lamming, <i>In the Castle of My Skin</i> (reading response due Mon. 9/14) Course Reader: Lamming, “The Occasion for Speaking” Th: <i>In the Castle of My Skin</i> , cont’d.
Sep. 22 & 24	T: <i>ITCOMS</i> , cont’d. <i>The predicament of exile.</i> Th: Course Reader: Cliff (required), Hall (highly recommended)
Sep. 29 & Oct. 1	T: V. S. Naipaul, <i>The Mimic Men</i> (reading response due Mon. 9/28) Th: <i>The Mimic Men</i> , cont’d.
Oct. 6 & 8	T: <i>MM</i> , cont’d. Th: Midterm catch-up?
Oct. 13 & 15	<i>Interlude: Final Project Prep</i> T: Doing research in the library and on the web Th: Wikis, web-spinning, and other DigHum fun (“Research Paper In a Box” due)
Oct. 20 & 22	<i>Rethinking postcolonialism: art, history, identity.</i> Course Reader: James, “Discovering Literature in Trinidad”; Walcott, “Muse of History” (and possible poems TBA) Also: Derek Walcott, “Overture: What the Twilight Said” (essay, highly recommended) and “Dream on Monkey Mountain” (play, required), both in <i>Dream on Monkey Mountain</i> (reading response due Mon. 10/19)
Oct. 27 & 29	Kamau Brathwaite, <i>The Arrivants</i> (reading response due Mon. 10/26) Course Reader: Rohlehr, Brathwaite
Nov. 3 & 5	T: Brathwaite, <i>The Arrivants</i> (cont’d) <i>The vernacular goes modern.</i> Th: <i>Iere Now and Long Ago: A Century of Calypso in Trinidad</i> (reading response due Wed. 11/4)
Nov. 10 & 12	<i>Iere Now and Long Ago</i> (cont’d).
Nov. 17 & 19	<i>The Caribbean moves North...</i> Jamaica Kincaid, <i>Lucy</i> (reading response due Mon. 11/16) Course Reader: Gilroy
Dec. 1 & 3	<i>...but some things don't travel so well.</i> Course Reader: Lovelace, “Joebell and America” (highly recommended) Also: Earl Lovelace, <i>The Dragon Can't Dance</i> (reading response due Mon. 11/30) 1st draft of Final Project (whatever that turns out to be) due?
Dec. 8 & 10	T: Lovelace, <i>The Dragon Can't Dance</i> (cont’d) Th: Catch-up, and/or begin official unveiling of final projects.

N.B.: There is no final exam in this course, but we will very probably meet one last time during our scheduled exam period, Wednesday, December 16 from 12:40-2:30, for (more) web-page unveiling, last words, tearful goodbyes, and—who knows?—perhaps some jerk chicken with peas & rice. Keep this day and time open.