

Instructor: Nijah Cunningham
Department of English
Department of African American and African Studies
Course Hours: Mon. & Wed. 10 a.m. - 11:20 a.m.
Course Location: Conklin 342
Office Hours: Mon. & Wed. 12 p.m. - 1 p.m.
Office Location: Conklin 326

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Other-Futures: Race, Gender, and Catastrophe in Modern Caribbean Literature
[350:256 & 014:303]



“That which we call progress, is *this* storm.”

-Walter Benjamin

Course Description:

This course examines the relationship between catastrophe and literary form. Focusing on novels and poetry that address the historical loss and injustices that have given shape to the modern Caribbean, we will explore questions of both race and gender and investigate how their dynamic interplay has relegated the black body to a particular time and space of disaster. We will analyze various attempts by Caribbean writers and artists to both reinterpret the history of blackness and illuminate other-futures (alternative visions of freedom and survival) from the terror and violence that haunts black life in the Caribbean and its diasporas. In addition to novels and poetry, we will take up other cultural and aesthetic forms such as popular music, visual art, and political newsreels. Here are some questions to think with: How does one narrate stories of exile, abandonment, and defeat? In what ways have Caribbean writers and artists responded to ruptures, wounds, silences, and gaps that constitute their past? What hopes and dreams remain embedded in the wreckage of the Caribbean’s catastrophic history and what might these unrealized futures help us re-imagine in our own?

Over the semester students will gain analytic reading skills and develop an understanding of critical debates within the study of modern Caribbean literature. In addition to the theme of catastrophe, this course will explore the topics of community, belonging, cultural nationalism, diaspora, domination, and resistance while paying close attention to the constructions of race and gender that inform our conceptions of the history of the Caribbean. Writing assignments, groups projects, and exams will help facilitate students engagement with course materials and also serve as guides for our exploration of catastrophe as a generative concept for thinking about our present post-colonial reality.

Required Texts:

Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955)
Maryse Condé, *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (1986)
Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007)
Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones* (1998)
Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy* (1990)
Patricia Powell, *A Small Gathering of Bones* (1994)
Orlando Patterson, *The Children of Sisyphus* (1964)
All additional readings are available on Blackboard.

Course Requirements:

- (1) Reading Responses (10%): Students are required to post a brief yet substantive reading response (~500 words) on Blackboard throughout the course of the semester. Responses will be due at 5pm on the Sunday *before* each week marked with an asterisk (*).
- (2) Participation (5%): Active and engaged participation during class meetings is required.
- (3) Midterm exam (25%): A take-home exam will be distributed on October 2 and will be due in class on October 14.
- (4) Collaborative project (20%): Students will take part in a collaborative project that will revolve around the “The Visual Life of Catastrophe” series published in *Small Axe*. Students will sign up for groups during the second week of October and will give presentations during the final week of the semester.
- (5) Final essay (40%): A final essay (10-12 pages) will be due at 5 p.m. on December 18.

[**Note:** All late assignments will be penalized 1/3 a letter grade for each day late]

Students with Disabilities:

Students with disabilities, including learning disabilities, requiring assistance and/or accommodation should speak with Disability Services in a timely manner.

Attendance:

Attendance and active participation are expected for each class meeting. Students are allowed no more than three absences. Any additional unexcused absence will lead to a penalization of the student’s final grade. Any student who misses eight or more sessions through any combination of excused and unexcused absences will not earn credit in this class. Such students should withdraw to avoid getting an F. Please refer below to the breakdown of final grade penalties that will accrue with excessive absences:

<u>Number of absences</u>	<u>Final grade penalty</u>
4	1/3 of a letter (total)
5	2/3 of a letter
6	full letter
7	1 1/3 letters
8	F or W

According to the University Catalog, “the recognized grounds for absence are illness requiring medical attention, curricular or extracurricular activities approved by the faculty, personal obligations claimed by the student and recognized as valid, recognized religious holidays, and severe inclement weather causing dangerous traveling conditions.” An excused absence is one that falls within these recognized grounds. Any other absence will be considered unexcused.

Lateness: Students should keep in mind that each lateness counts as a “half-absence.” Please let me know in advance if you plan on arriving late to a particular session. An excused lateness will not count against the student’s record of attendance.

Academic Integrity:

All students must e-sign an “Academic Integrity Agreement” through Blackboard.

Class Schedule:

Week 1

September 4: Introduction

Week 2

September 8: Joyelle McSweeney, “Poetics, Revelations, and Catastrophes: An Interview with Kamau Brathwaite”

David Scott, “The Visual Life of Catastrophe: A Small Axe Project Statement”

September 11: Frantz Fanon, “The Negro and Language” and “The Fact of Blackness,” from *Black Skin, White Masks*

Week 3*

September 16: Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*

Aimé Césaire, “Poetry and Knowledge”

Recommended: Robin D.G. Kelley, “A Poetics of Anticolonialism,” an introduction to Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*

September 18: Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to a Native Land*

Recommended: James Clifford, “A Poetics of Neologism: Aimé Césaire”

Week 4*

September 23: Kamau Brathwaite, “History of the Voice”

Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* (excerpts)

Recommended: Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”

September 25: Kamau Brathwaite, "Metaphors of Underdevelopment"

Week 5*

September 30: M. NourbeSe Philip, "The Absence of Writing or How I Almost Became a Spy"
Sylvia Wynter, "Afterward: Beyond Miranda's Meaning: Un/silencing the
Demonic Ground of 'Caliban's Woman'"
Thomas Glave, "Whose Caribbean? An Allegory in Part"
Recommended: Evelyn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of
Black Female Sexuality"

October 2: M. NourbeSe Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Break* (excerpts)
M. NourbeSe Philip, "Letter to Kamau Brathwaite"
Thomas Glave, "Panic and Despair: When the Words Do Not Come (But Then an
Unexpected Journey)"
--Midterm exam will be distributed on October 2--

Week 6

October 7: CLR James, "Triumph"
Wilson Harris, "Kanaima"
Sylvia Wynter, "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation"
October 9: Orlando Patterson, *The Children of Sisyphus*

--Midterm exam due in class on October 14--

Week 7

October 14: Orlando Patterson, *The Children of Sisyphus* (continued)
October 16: Orlando Patterson, *The Children of Sisyphus* (continued)
Recommended: Orlando Patterson, "Rastafari: A Cult of Outcasts"
Garth White, "Rudie, Oh Rudie!"
Sonjah Stanley-Niaah, "Kingston's Dancehall"

Week 8*

October 21: Maryse Condé, *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*
October 23: Maryse Condé, *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (continued)

Week 9*

October 28: Maryse Condé, *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (continued)
October 30: Frantz Fanon, "The Woman of Colour and the White Man"
Maryse Condé, "Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer"

Week 10*

November 4: Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy*
Jamaica Kincaid, "In History"

November 6: Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy* (continued)

Week 11*

November 11: Patricia Powell, *A Small Gathering of Bones*

November 13: Patricia Powell, *A Small Gathering of Bones* (continued)

Recommended: Lyndon K. Gill, "Chatting Back an Epidemic: Caribbean Gay Men, HIV/AIDS, and the Uses of Erotic Subjectivity"

Week 12*

November 18: Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones*

November 20: Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones* (continued)

Week 13

November 25: Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones* (continued)

Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "The Odd and Ordinary: Haiti, the Caribbean, and the World"

November 27: *Thanksgiving Recess*

Week 14*

December 2: Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

December 4: Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (continued)

Week 15

December 9: Group presentations

December 11: Group presentations

Final essay due at 5 p.m. on Wednesday, December 18.