—OBERLIN COLLEGE—
FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR PROGRAM

FYSP 129:
Coming of Age in African Literature

—Cultural Diversity Course (CD)—
—Writing Intensive Course (W-Int)—

Fall 2014—Prof. Len Podis (King 139; Office Hours: T-Th 2–3 p.m. or by appt.)
Course Writing Associate: Gbolahan Adeola

Course Overview:

This course will focus on African literature of the late colonial and postcolonial periods. Our main concern will be the work of writers from formerly colonized African countries. We will focus on coming of age in two ways. First, many of the books feature youthful protagonists who face the challenges of growing up amid difficult social and political circumstances. Second, we will study the “coming of age” of modern African literature itself.

Although the subject of our study is literature, our approach will be interdisciplinary. While reading the works to appreciate their literary qualities, we will also attempt to view them as products of the cultures and the social and political circumstances that produced them. In other words, we will examine the literary works as complex expressions of their contexts, as well as indicators of the values and worldviews of the societies in which they were composed. We will explore ways in which the writings reflect particular issues and themes related to the colonial and postcolonial African experience.

Because of the nature of the literature we will be studying and because of the special goals of the First-Year Seminar Program, this course will stress diversity in approaches to learning as well as subject matter. In the spirit of liberal arts learning, we will explore literature that is not often read in English courses, and we will do so in a way that makes use of broad-based methods of inquiry. For one thing, we will employ alternative approaches to the typically western “formalist” or “aesthetic” ways of reading and evaluating works of literature. For another, we will strive for a less authoritarian, more “de-centered” mode of operation in the classroom. As your professor, I believe that I can best use my authority by supporting your attempts to develop your authority as committed learners and students.

A major goal of a liberal arts education is to enable students to participate in a multiplicity of powerful, ongoing conversations (sometimes called “discourses”) that shape knowledge in the academy and in the world beyond it. Thus your participation in class discussion is crucial to the success of the course, as we will attempt to create what scholars call a “discourse community” within our own class—a community that mirrors the larger scholarly communities that form the curricular focus of a liberal arts education. Please note that our Writing Associate, Adeola, is an important resource in your learning process. He will hold office hours and regularly schedule individual conferences to discuss your weekly journal entries and your course essay assignments.

Note: This is a Writing-Intensive (W-Int) course that counts toward the College of Arts and Sciences Writing Requirement. Students must pass two “W” courses (W-Int or W-Adv) to meet the requirement. This course also counts toward the Cultural Diversity (CD) Requirement.
Major Objectives:

• To introduce you to the study of colonial and postcolonial African literature

• To encourage a non-western perspective on the subject matter of the course. This is a challenging task, since we are working within a western educational institution, and most of us come to the course with decidedly western perspectives.

• To offer an interdisciplinary approach to the study of literature—that is, to consider literature not only from a literary perspective but also from political, social, and historical perspectives.

• To provide you with a seminar-type setting in which to explore the subject matter in a hands-on, interactive, participatory style. Ideally, this approach will help you to develop these skills:
  • Critical thinking, especially interpreting and evaluating literary texts
  • Writing, especially about literature
  • Discussion skills

Course Requirements:

1. Regular attendance. This is crucial. You will be penalized one letter grade if you miss more than two classes without an acceptable excuse. I am enforcing this strict attendance policy not to be punitive or authoritarian or to instill submissive habits in you, but because your presence and participation are essential to our work.

2. Reading of assigned texts. These are listed on the schedule that follows.

3. Participation in class discussion. In general, everyone will be asked to participate in class discussion at least once during each class session.

4. Completion of a journal entry each week. Entries should explore some aspect of the readings for the week. They should be approximately 2–3 pages in length and may be typed or handwritten. They are due every Tuesday, except for the first week’s entry, which is due Thursday, September 4. During weeks when formal essays are due, I will suspend the journal requirement. Please note that I place great importance on your journal entries. They show me the quality and progress of your thinking and your writing, and they help to guide discussion.

5. Three essays. The first and second papers should be roughly 6pp each, the third about 8-10pp. I expect everyone to draft and revise each paper in consultation with classmates, the course Writing Associate (Adeola) and me. Even if you are already a highly accomplished writer, you should use the assignments in this course—including the journal entries—as an opportunity to improve your abilities.

6. Presentation/Workshop. Each student will give a presentation/workshop according to a sign-up sheet that I will circulate. The presentation should take the form of a workshop on a draft of a paper that you are writing for the course. In this way you will be enlightening others by sharing your ideas with them and also learning from others by getting advice on your paper in progress. You will also get an opportunity to refine your writing skills as you revise your draft.

7. Conferences with our WA, Adeola. I expect everyone to meet at least once with Adeola in conjunction with each of the three essay assignments. Fulfilling this requirement will add 1/3 of a letter grade to your final grade (e.g., moving a B to a B+). Failure to honor the requirement may result in the loss of 1/3 of a letter grade (e.g., moving a B to a B-).
Grading:

This is a graded course. However, as much as possible, I would like you to put aside the pressures that come with grading to adopt a trial-and-error mentality and take risks that may help you expand your understanding of the literature and improve your approach to learning and writing. Rather than dwell on grading, I hope we can concentrate on the tasks before us and draw inspiration from the challenges and rewards of reading and writing: discovering, expressing and communicating ideas; solving problems; and informing and enlightening each other. To facilitate this approach, I use a form of what is often called contract grading. If you (1) attend regularly, (2) participate in course activities with commitment, and (3) do all the required assignments at an acceptable level, you will earn a B. These required activities and assignments include reading all the texts, submitting the weekly journal entries, participating in class discussion, giving a presentation/workshop, and drafting and revising three essays. If you do all the above and pursue your work with exceptional intensity, you may move up to the A range. If you don’t meet the contract, you will get a C, D, or F, depending on how much you depart from the contract (e.g., more than two unexcused absences will cost you one letter grade; not meeting with Adeola may result in the loss of 1/3 letter grade). Rather than put grades on your journal entries and papers, I will provide extensive written comments. At the end of the semester, I will invite you to submit a final self-evaluation (2pp.) that I will consider as I determine course grades.

Honor Code: Please write the honor code pledge on all assignments and sign your name following it: “I affirm that I have adhered to the Honor Code in this assignment.” For more information on the honor code, go to https://new.oberlin.edu/arts-and-sciences/academic-resources-and-support/honor-code.dot

Required Texts
Available at the college bookstore (except for Nervous Conditions and Flowers and Shadows, which are available on Blackboard and “An Ex-Mas Feast,” which is available on the New Yorker website)

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. Purple Hibiscus.
Aidoo, Ama Ata. Our Sister Killjoy.
Akpan, Uwem “An Ex-Mas Feast,” available online at http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/06/13/050613fi_fiction1
Beah, Ishmael. A Long Way Gone.
Dangarembga, Tsitsi. Nervous Conditions. (on Blackboard)
Emecheta, Buehi. The Bride Price.
Laye, Camara. The Dark Child.
Ngugi wa Thion’o. Weep Not, Child.
Nwapa, Flora. Efuru.
Okri, Ben. Flowers and Shadows (on Blackboard).
Soyinka, Wole. Death and the King’s Horseman.
Schedule of Class Meetings and Assignments:

**Week 1 — Tuesday, September 2**

- Introductions
- Brief overview of goals related to Liberal Arts Learning:
  - Critical Thinking: Breadth, Depth, Problem-Solving, and Open-Mindedness
  - Discussion Skills: Listening, Speaking, Facilitating Dialogue
  - Writing: Thoughtfulness, Thoroughness, Clarity, Order, and Expressiveness
- Review of syllabus
- Assignment for Thursday: Read Podis & Saaka, *Challenging Hierarchies*, “Preface” (pp. xi–xiii) and “Introduction” (pp. 1–10). Also, read Saaka & Podis, “Ongoing Dialogues in African Literature,” on Oberlin Online. The web site address is http://www.oberlin.edu/news-info/observations/observations_saaka_podis1.html
- For Thursday, write your first journal entry. Today in class we will briefly review some sample journal entries from past semesters. In your entry for Thursday, you should discuss any reactions you have to the readings, raise questions you have about approaching this field of study, and discuss whether you have had any prior experience with colonial or postcolonial literature. Please bring the journal entry with you to class on Thursday, September 4. I will ask everyone to choose an excerpt from the journal entry to read aloud in class.

**Thursday, September 4**

- Podis/Saaka, *Challenging Hierarchies* “Preface” (pp. xi–xiii) & “Introduction” (pp. 1–10)
- **Note:** Your first journal entry is due in class today. Plan to read part of your entry aloud.
- Assignment for next week: Laye, *The Dark Child* and Aidoo, “Male-ing Names in the Sun” (Chapter 5 in *Challenging Hierarchies*). Write your second journal entry and bring it to class next Tuesday, September 9.

**Part I: Childhood Quests/Culture and Tradition**

**Week 2 — September 9 & 11**

*French colonialism and the Négritude movement/ British Colonial Education*

- Laye, *The Dark Child* (*L’Enfant noir* in the original French version)
- **Note:** Second journal entry due in class on Tuesday, September 9 (journals due every Tues.)
Week 3 — September 16 & 18
British Colonialism and its impact/ Anglophone literature

• Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*


• Assignment of first essay (due Thurs., October 9). Schedule conferences with our course Writing Associate, Adeola

• Sign up for presentation/workshops

Week 4 — September 23 & 25
Gender, Tradition, and the Colonial Context

• Nwapa, *Efuru*


• Schedule conferences with Adeola (to continue each week until paper is due)

• Presentation/workshops begin.

Week 5 — September 30 & October 2
Gender and Education in the Colonial Era

• Emecheta, *The Bride Price*

• Presentation/workshops based on Essay #1

Week 6 — October 7 & 9
Ongoing Dialogues in African Literature

• We will finish discussing *The Bride Price* this week.

• Saaka and Podis, “‘[U]ntil the Lions Have Their Own Historians’: Chinua Achebe and the Ongoing Dialogues of Modern African Literature” (Handout)

• Because there is a paper due this week, no journal entry is due.

• Presentation/workshops based on Essay #1

• **Note:** Final draft of the first essay is due in class on Thursday, October 9. In class, I will ask people to read aloud an excerpt from their paper and to speak about what they wrote, what they learned from the experience, and how it relates to what we’ve been discussing in class. I am hoping that we can all benefit from the work everyone has done on their papers, rather than having them addressed only to me, the professor. Through circulating everyone’s ideas in this way, we can emphasize that scholarly knowledge is shaped through discourse communities—groups of people who conduct ongoing conversations (written and oral) about the subjects of
their study. Such communities are the basis of the disciplines that we study in a liberal arts curriculum. Discussing what everyone has written should also enable us to revisit the texts and issues we have been focusing on in the first few weeks of the course.

**Week 7—October 14 & 16**  
*Education and Political Change*

- Ngugi, *Weep Not, Child*


**Week 8—October 21 & 23**  
**FALL VACATION**

**Part II: Resistance and Adaptation**

**Week 9—October 28 & 30**  
*Clash of Cultures?*

- Soyinka, *Death and the King’s Horseman*

- Second essay assigned (due Thursday, November 2)—Schedule conferences with Adeola

**Week 10—November 4 & 6**  
*“Reflections from a Black-Eyed Squint”*

- Aidoo, *Our Sister Killjoy*


- Conferences with Adeola, as scheduled. (To continue until Essay #2 is due)

**Week 11—November 11 & 13**  
*Women’s Struggles for Equality in Colonial and Postcolonial Society*

- Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* (available on Blackboard)


**Week 12—November 18 & 20**  
*Coming of Age in Neocolonial Society, Part I*

- Okri, *Flowers and Shadows* (available on Blackboard)


- Because there is a paper due this week, no journal entry is due.
• Final draft of the second essay is due in class on Thursday, November 20. I will again ask people to read aloud an excerpt from their paper and to speak about what they wound up writing, what they learned from it, and how it relates to what we’ve been discussing. Remember to conceive of your paper as a contribution to an ongoing conversation among members of our classroom discourse community.

Week 13—November 25 (Note: No class on November 27—Thanksgiving Day)
Coming of Age in Neocolonial Society, Part II

• Tuesday: Begin Adichie, Purple Hibiscus
• Thursday: Thanksgiving Day—No Class
• Final essay assigned (due Thursday, December 18)

Week 14—December 2 & 4
Coming of Age in Neocolonial Society, Part III

• Tuesday: Finish discussing Purple Hibiscus
• Thursday: Begin Beah, A Long Way Gone.
• Sign up for conferences with Adeola

Week 15—December 9 & 11

• Finish discussing A Long Way Gone.
• Akpan, “An Ex-Mas Feast,” available online at http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/06/13/050613fi_fiction1

December 13 through December 16: READING PERIOD—NO CLASSES

• Continue working on your final paper. It is due Thursday, December 18, at 11:00 a.m. as an email attachment
• Conferences with Adeola, as scheduled.

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The last class meeting is Thursday, December 11. The final draft of the third essay is due Thursday, December 18, at 11:00 a.m. Please submit it electronically, as an email attachment. There is no final examination for this course. I invite you to submit a self-evaluation (two pages or so) in which you are free to suggest the grade you believe you have earned. While I cannot promise to give you that grade, I will consider your self-evaluation seriously as I determine final grades. (Please review the detailed statement on grading at the top of p. 3 of this syllabus.)