EN3PWW: POSTCOLONIAL WOMEN’S WRITING

WORKING JOURNAL 2008-9

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NAME:

CONTACT INFORMATION:
AIMS & OBJECTIVES

The introduction of a Working Journal as an assessed element on this module is designed to encourage and reward thorough and careful preparation for seminars, as well as organised study habits. By making written entries of your reading and other preparatory activities for each week, you will be well prepared to take an active role in seminars and hopefully gain more insight into your own learning experience. In addition, you will develop a useful archive to draw on when writing your essay.

ASSESSMENT

Your Working Journal will be assessed on the regularity of entries, length of entries and appropriateness of entries. The Journal should demonstrate a continuous involvement with the material covered by the module and there should be no holes. Your entries in the Working Journal should demonstrate that you have met the following requirements:

i) consistent attention to the whole module
ii) note-taking from reading
iii) thoughtful preparation for seminars, including the formulation of questions/issues for seminar discussion
iv) reflection on seminar discussion and your own learning development

Your Journal will be used as a seminar resource each week and will also be signed by your tutor on a regular basis. Although the Journal will be taken in for final assessment at the end of the module, it should consist of ‘real’ notes taken during the course and not a tidied-up version.

WEEKLY ENTRIES

You are required to write weekly entries recording your preparation for the seminar. You should include notes taken when reading the primary text/s and any secondary material. As the learning journal is designed to help you identify and seek solutions to problems encountered during your reading and research, you should record your enthusiasms and abilities, as well as any difficulties and problems you have understanding texts or concepts. It is important that you show some reflection on your engagement with the module.

You should make reference to all of the set readings but you do not have to cover them all in the same detail. Look up any words that you don’t know and record their meaning. In addition to theme and content, pay attention to style, tone, structure, vocabulary, imagery and language.

You will work under the following headings as a basic structure for your weekly entries:
Response:

Note down your first impressions of the piece/s you have read this week.

Make a note of the passages that you would want to read again in more detail.

Identify the ideas, issues, topics that are interesting to you.

Make a note of any interesting features with regard to language, structure or other aspects of its written style.

Questions:

What kinds of questions do you think this text is concerned with?

Are there questions that you want to bring to this text that may trouble its ‘internal meaning’?

Synthesis:

Does this text link to others you have studied?

Does it have issues / debates / tropes that you have identified before?

Are there connections that can be made across different modules or with material that you have encountered outside the course?

Other preparation:

Record any additional reading or preparation that you have undertaken in the past week.

These entries in the Working Journal are also intended to offer you some speculative freedom, often not enjoyed in essay or exam work. You are encouraged to make a note of your personal engagement with the texts, to be creative in your responses and to take risks in terms of your critical approaches. Asking questions without always having answers, reflecting on doubts and speculating on possible pathways are all encouraged. Exploratory learning such as browsing through the journal and book holdings in libraries and web browsing will be valued. Indeed, evidence of any independent exploration of material relevant to the work covered on the module will be rewarded.

For each week there will also be a series of questions directed at the text that we are studying. These will help to structure our seminar discussion and act as a focus for your secondary reading. They are not meant to limit your critical enquiry, but rather to offer useful starting points. Make a note of particular passages or pages in the primary and secondary reading that you can refer to during seminar discussions.
You will also be directed to a single piece of literary criticism, historical context or theory and asked to comment on that in relation to the text and the issues raised by the module as a whole. In addition, there are a small number of tasks that are designed to help you to learn more effectively.

*Acknowledgement is made to Making Your Case: A Practical Guide to Essay Writing edited by Rebecca Stott, Anna Snaith & Rick Rylance (Pearson, 2001) and to the Report on Reading Dossiers sponsored by the English Subject Centre.
COURSE OUTLINE

SESSION ONE: Postcolonial and a Woman: Debates and Contexts

SESSION TWO: Africa: Tradition, Loss and Sisterhood
So Long A Letter, Mirama Ba

SESSION THREE: Africa: An African Education
No Sweetness Here and Other Stories, Ama Ata Aidoo

SESSION FOUR: Africa: Violated Lives and Loves
Butterfly Burning, Yvonne Vera

SESSION FIVE: Africa: Accommodating Difference
The Pick-Up, Nadine Gordimer

SESSION SIX: Caribbean: The Other Side
Wide Sargasso Sea, Jean Rhys

SESSION SEVEN: Caribbean: Diasporic Desires
Lucy, Jamaica Kincaid

SESSION EIGHT: Caribbean: New Fruit and Strange Blooms
Cereus Blooms at Night, Shani Mootoo

SESSION NINE: Caribbean: Hidden Histories
Barred, Ramabai Espinet
Selected Secondary Reading:


Reina Lewis & Sara Mills, eds., *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, Edinburgh, EUP, 2003. (396.01-FEM 7 day)

Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (eds), *Dangerous liaisons : gender, nation, and postcolonial perspectives*, Minneapolis ; London : University of Minnesota Press, c1997


Andrew Parker (et al. eds) *Nationalisms & sexualities*, New York ; London : Routledge, c1992


**Journals**

*Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*

*Postcolonial Studies*

*Journal of Commonwealth Literature*

*JWIL Journal of West Indian Literature*,

*Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 
(Formerly World Literature Written in English)

*Jouvert*  [http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert](http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert)

*Diaspora: Journal of Transnational Studies*

*Ariel: A Review of International English Literatures*

*Wasafiri*
SESSION I

Establishing a Critical Vocabulary

This exercise is designed to help you develop a critical vocabulary enabling to the study of postcolonial women’s writing. You are expected to have completed this worksheet for session 2.

This module will consistently reflect on the status and meaning of the terms postcolonial and woman and the pressures that these two terms can be seen to exert on each other. The theoretical models discussed within this module will centre on two major bodies of relevant scholarship – feminist and post-colonial literary criticism / theory. These critical paradigms also work with specific critical vocabularies which promote productive questions and responses. If you are able to familiarise yourself with the terms listed below, you will be better equipped to meet the conceptual challenges involved in reading and interpreting the texts on the module. However, there are many other critical approaches – diasporic, historicist, Marxist – that may also prove useful and you are encouraged to read as widely as possible and to take some critical ‘risks’.

Summarise the definitions of the following terms. Try to find as many definitions of each term as possible and make a note of any interesting differences.

WOMAN

SEX

GENDER
SEXUALITY

FEMININITY

FEMINISM

WOMEN’S WRITING

POSTCOLONIAL

COLONIALISM
NEO-COLONIALISM

IMPERIALISM

NATIONALISM

DECOLONISATION

EUROCENTRISM

HYBRIDITY

GLOBALISATION
SESSION 2

Response:
Questions:

Synthesis:

Other Preparation
So Long A Letter, Mariama Bà

QUESTIONS:

1) In what ways does the letter form shape the narrative and its voice?

2) Is female friendship the structure of feeling that drives this narrative? What other structures of companionship and feeling is this relationship set alongside and to what effect?
3) How does the novel represent the various risks and rewards open to women in relation to the choices between tradition and modernity?

4) To what effect are these two categories of tradition and modernity mapped on to African and the West?

*Please mark relevant passages and pages for class discussion.*
Read Christina Abuk’s article, ‘Urbanisation's long shadows: Mariama Ba’s *So Long A Letter,*’ and make a note of her main arguments.

Which aspects of the argument did you find most useful?
Which aspects of the argument would you want to dispute or refine in the light of your own reading or other critical essays that you have read?
Further Reading


Deborah G. Plant. 'Mythic Dimensions in the Novels of Mariama Bâ' by, in *Research in African Literatures* 27.2. (1996)

Charles Ponnuthurai Sarvan. 'Feminism and African Fiction: The Novels of Mariama Bâ', *Modern Fiction Studies* 34.3 (1988)

SESSION 3

Response:
Questions:

Synthesis:

Other Preparation
Questions:

1) ‘I come from a people who told stories…I think I came from a long line of fighters.’ In what ways might these two statements by Aidoo offer us a way to interpret her short stories?

2) In what ways and to what effects do Aidoo’s stories engage with issue of urbanization, also relevant to Ba’s work?
3) On what terms might we describe the stories as feminist works?

4) Comment on the ways in which Aidoo realizes the oral, or voice dimensions, of language within these written works.

*Please mark relevant passages and pages for class discussion.
Close Reading

Make a close reading (500 words) of one of the stories selected for today’s seminar discussion. Comment in detail on any aspects of the piece that seem to be important in the light of your study of postcolonial women’s writing. Remember that as well as commenting on theme and content, you should pay attention to style, tone, structure, vocabulary, imagery and language.
Further Reading

Ama Ata Aidoo. ‘To Be A Woman’ in *Sisterhood is Global* edited by Robin Morgan (1985)


Adeola James (ed). *In their Own Voices* (1990)


SESSION 4

Response:
QUESTIONS:

1) In what ways does the novel move between ideas of vulnerability and those of strength?

2) Does the poetic style of the novel help shape a particular reading?

*Please mark relevant passages and pages for class discussion.*
Text and Context

Terrance Ranger has argued that Vera’s novel is ‘written in the pauses of the historian’s narrative, at a moment when everyone expects something to happen but nothing has’.

Research the historical background to this novel and try to consider in what ways it may be read as an historical story? You may wish to focus on women’s history, the history of sexual politics in Zimbabwe, the wider political context or any other aspect that seems relevant to you. Attach photocopies of any relevant historical documents and offer an analysis of 500 words.
Further Reading


Grace Musila. ‘Embodying Experience and Agency in Yvonne Vera’s *Without a Name* and *Butterfly Burning’* Research in African Literatures 38. 2 (Summer 2007), 49-63

Caroline Rooney. *Decolonising Gender: Literature and the Politics of the Real* (Routledge, 2007)

Ranka Primorac. ‘Crossing Into the Space-Time of Memory: Borderline Identities in Novels by Yvonne Vera’, The Journal of Commonwealth Literature 36 (2) (2001), 77-93

Special Issue of Research in African Literatures 38. 2 (Summer 2007) edited by Elizabeth Gunner & Neil Ten Kortenaar
SESSION 5

Response:
Questions:

Synthesis:

Other Preparation
The Pickup, Nadine Gordimer

QUESTIONS:

1) In what ways does the novel either confirm or question the idea of the ‘pickup’?

2) In Arabic, the name Abdu, which Ibrahim adopts as a refugee, means servant (usually abbreviated from Abdullah, meaning servant of God). How does the novel explore the relationship between the politics of location and the power dynamics of interpersonal relationships?
3) Gordimer has described *The Pickup* as part of the post-apartheid ‘literature of transition’. What aspects of the novel would we highlight if we were to interpret the novel within this framework?

*Please mark relevant passages and pages for class discussion.*
Feminist Theory

Gayatri Spivak is widely recognized as one of the most important postcolonial theorists and her work has consistently engaged with the particular conditions of women’s oppression. As Stephen Morton has argued, ‘Spivak’s theoretical work has always criticized the limits of existing structures of political representation, and carefully elaborated the conditions of possibility for a new idiom in which the subaltern can speak and be heard’.

In an interview [photocopied], Spivak asks “Try it, you might like it. Try to behave as if you are a part of the margin, try to unlearn your privilege.” (Spivak in Harasym, 1990: 30). Comment on Spivak’s provocation and what you take her to mean by this phrase? You may wish to draw on other parts of the interview.
How might the character of Julie be seen to correspond with the feminist and decolonising strategy that Spivak invokes?
Response:
Questions:

Synthesis:

Other Preparation
QUESTIONS:

1) In one of her letters Jean Rhys writes ‘Come with me and you will see. Take a look at Jane Eyre. That unfortunate death of a Creole! I’m fighting mad to write her story.’ In what ways might these words be taken alongside the novel’s “There is always the other side, always” (106) as guides to the different kinds of pressures towards ethical representation that are working within this piece of postcolonial women’s writing?

2) ‘This is a free country and I am a free woman.’ In what ways might Rhys’s novel to be seen to draw on the discourse of emancipation in order to talk about gender oppression, as well as ‘freedom’ from the slavery of the plantation?
3)'Read and write I don’t know. Other things I know.' In her article, ‘Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,’ [Critical Inquiry 12, (Autumn 1985)], Gayatri Spivak argues that ‘Christophene is simply driven out of the story, with neither narrative nor characterological explanation’ (253). What kind of presence does Christophene have in the linguistic world of the novel and how might we interpret this presence against Spivak’s claim about her absence?
Rhys’s novel is clearly engaged with the racialised history and environment of the Caribbean and the book’s reception has also been dramatically shaped by these issues. Suspicions and rejections of Jean Rhys’s place in a tradition of West Indian writing have focused on her whiteness and the fact that she was descended from members of the plantocracy. The Barbadian cultural critic and theorist Kamau Brathwaite staked out his position on Rhys’s literary belonging very strongly in his study *Contradictory Omens* (1974)

White creoles in the English and French West Indies have separated themselves by too wide a gulf and have contributed too little culturally, as a group, to give credence to the notion that they can, given the present structure, meaningfully identify or be indentified with the spiritual world on this side of the Sargasso Sea.

Yet Brathwaite himself also observes that:

There are of course, ‘white people’, in the West Indies, but these are regarded either as too far apart to count or too inextricably mixed into the whole problem to be considered as separate.

Discussion and debate concerning Rhys’s status within this tradition has continued. Access some of the relevant *Wasafiri* articles and comment on the various positions argued for in relation to Rhys’s novel as a piece of Caribbean writing (and women’s writing). [*Wasafiri*, 20, Autumn, 1994, 5-11; *Wasafiri*, 21, Spring 1995, 69-78; *Wasafiri*, 28, Autumn, 1998, 33-38]
Counter discourse

In a 1982 article for the *Times*, Salman Rushdie discussed the way in which “the Empire writes back to the Centre” and this idea or trope of ‘writing back’ (the way in which postcolonial writers and texts engage with colonial literary works) has become one of the touchstones of postcolonial literary studies, often symbolizing the field’s twinned agenda of resistance and representation.

In her article, 'Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse,' Helen Tiffin, describes the political effects of these texts.

The processes of artistic and literary decolonization have involved a radical dis/mantling of European codes and a post-colonial subversion and appropriation of the dominant European discourses...Post-colonial counter-discursive strategies involve a mapping of the dominant discourse, a reading and exposing of its underlying assumptions, and the dis/mantling of these assumptions from the cross-cultural standpoint of the imperially subjectified 'local'.

(Tiffin: 17)

How, within this model of postcolonial writing, might Rhys’s novel be seen to stand against rather than within an English literary tradition?
Further Reading


Wilson Harris, 'Carnival of the Psyche: Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea', *Reappraising An Empire* (Harvard University, 1984)


Elizabeth Nunez-Harrel. 'The Paradoxes of Belonging : The White West Indian Woman in Fiction', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 31.2 (Summer 1985) 281-93

Kenneth Ramchand. 'Terrified Consciousness', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, no 7, July 1969

SESSION 7

Response:
Questions:

Synthesis:

Other Preparation
**Lucy, Jamaica Kincaid**

**QUESTIONS:**

1) In what ways does novel engage with the ideas of ‘being at home’ and how might it also help us to think critically about the difference between terms such as disporic subject, exile, migrant and stranger?

2) In what forms does desire circulate and how does manifest itself (or combust) in the novel?
3) What is relationship between sexuality, control and resistance in the narrative?

*Please mark relevant passages and pages for class discussion.
In her article, ‘The Politics of Location as Transnational Feminist Practice’ (1994), Caren Kaplan argues that “a transnational feminist politics of location in the best sense of the term refers us to the model of coalition or … affiliation. As a practice of affiliation, a politics of location identifies the grounds for historically specific differences and similarities between women in diverse and asymmetrical relations, creating alternative histories, identities and possibility of alliances.”(139)*

In what ways might Lucy confirm or contest this idea?
Addressing the idea of ‘universal sisterhood,’ Chandra Talpade Mohanty proposes that “the real challenge arises in being able to craft a notion of political unity without relying on the logic of appropriation and incorporation and, just as significantly, a denial of agency. I believe the unity of women is best understood as not given, on the basis of a natural/psychological commonality; it is something that has to be worked for, struggled toward – in history. What we need to do is articulate ways in which the historical forms of oppression relate to the category ‘women’ and not try to deduce one from the other. And it is here that a formulation of feminist solidarity or coalition makes sense (in contrast to a notion of universal sisterhood). (116)**

In what ways might *Lucy* be seen to provoke discussion around this philosophy of possible solidarity?
In what ways does *Lucy* help us to think about both geography and history as ideas within which we must come to understand, and maybe to challenge, the idea of one’s place in the world?


Further Reading


-----. 'Dreaming of Daffodils: cultural resistance to the narratives of Eurocentric theory in Kincaid's *Lucy*, *Kunapipi*, XIV (1992), 45-52


McDonald-Smythe Antonia. "Making Herself at Home in the West Indies: The Gendered Construction of Identity in the Writings of Michele Cliff and Jamaica Kincaid." London: Routledge, 2004


SESSION 8

Response:
Questions:

Synthesis:

Other Preparation
QUESTIONS:

1) How does this novel contest the (colonial & patriarchal) ideas of certain subjects being positioned and fixed in their ‘place’? (Think about place as dictated by both history and geography as discussed in relation to *Lucy*).

2) In what ways does the novel engage with the idea of identity as a construction and/or performance?
3) In what ways might the novel offer an alternative idea of the family and why might this be significant?

4) Who is not accommodated within either traditional or alternative kinship structures and why might this also be significant?

*Please mark relevant passages and pages for class discussion.*
Web Search

This task is designed to help you to think critically and creatively about the information that is available on the World Wide Web.

Explore different search engines and websites by searching for the terms ‘Caribbean sexuality’. Make a list of the different websites that you are directed to and the accuracy, quality and appropriateness of the material that you find.

Now refine your search by adding terms such as women, gender, gay rights, writing and literature. Experiment with different searches; add in names of writers and texts. Make a note of the authors, texts, issues etc that you find and the kind of information that you are directed to.
Make a summary of the discourses that dominate discussions about this subject (eg. popular, religious, musical) and summarise the general views.
Read Mimi Sheller’s article, ‘Work That Body: Sexual Citizenship and Embodied Freedom,’ and make a note of her main arguments.

Which aspects of the argument did you find most useful?
Which aspects of the argument would you want to dispute or refine in the light of your own reading or other critical essays that you have read?

How might you relate some of the points raised by Sheller to Cereus and / or other texts that we have read on the module?
Further Reading


SESSION 9

Response:
Questions:

Synthesis:

Other Preparation
This task is designed to make you aware of contemporary debates concerning the intersection of race, gender and sexuality in the Caribbean. It is based around chapter 6 of Shalini Puri’s book, *The Caribbean Postcolonial*, that offers a very close reading of ‘Barred’ but also reaches out towards important historical and cultural contexts.

Why do you think Puri returns to a discussion of history in order to debate cultural representation?

What is interesting or notable about the range of texts and contexts that Puri covers in this piece?
How do the issues and points raised in Puri’s chapter relate to the writings by Espinet and/or Mootoo?

What questions remain to ask of the story? Try to formulate two and explain why they interest you.

*Please mark relevant passages and pages for class discussion.
Further Reading


Verene Shepherd (ed.). *Maharani’s Misery: Narratives of a Passage from India to the Caribbean* (University of the West Indies Press, 2002)
Marginalisation

This task is designed to help you to think critically about the processes of marginalisation and selection that inform the creation of literary anthologies, modules and canons, and consequently the processes by which literary history comes into being. One way of approaching this question is to try to understand why certain writers/poets are selected and included in anthologies and others not?

Writings by Caribbean women of Indian ancestry were notably slower to emerge compared to African-Caribbean works and even now receive far less critical attention.

Select an anthology or collection of Caribbean writing or poetry from the library and try to analyse its rationale for selection (why it has made its particular selections). Provide the bibliographic details.

What kinds of figures or voices does it marginalize? What are the consequences of its particular axis of selection?
Select one poem or piece writing that is not included on this module. Make a photocopy of it. Discuss why you think it has not been chosen and how it can be accommodated with the category Caribbean women’s writing.
ESSAY PREPARATION

This worksheet is designed to help you to make careful and productive preparations for essay writing.

1 Researching the field
   i) Compile an annotated bibliography of four secondary works. Your annotation should relate the works to the issues and debates you wish to examine in your essay. Your comments can be both general and specific.

   ii) Take down 4 useful quotations from secondary works in another colour pen. Write around these with your own responses. Go through the same process with each primary text. REMEMBER that texts are your key resource and you need to read them constantly and carefully as you prepare to write.
2 Producing a diagnostic plan
i) Write a concise and detailed synopsis of your essay in 500 words. Ensure that you state your field of enquiry (scope, definition), your central argument and the theoretical propositions you intend to explore.
ii) Read over your plan and list three questions which you will need answers to before you can write the essay. Alternatively, list areas which you need to research more carefully.

3 Writing the essay
Always try to leave yourself a few days for writing the essay and wordprocessing. Leave 24hrs after a rough draft, this creates some distance between you and your work and allows you to see problems more clearly. Print out a copy in a different font and read it backwards to proof-read for errors. Reading your work aloud is often helpful if your expression is awkward or poor.

As you read through this first draft ask yourself these questions:

- Have I simply re-told, paraphrased or described the material?
- Have I presented a clear and structured argument?
- Have I sequenced my paragraphs to show a development of ideas?
- Have I 'signposted' my reading for the reader? (Leave your essay for a day before re-drafting and ensure that the aims and argument are clear)
- Have I checked my clarity of expression, punctuation and spelling? (Reading aloud helps with this)

- Have I listed all the secondary material which I have consulted, and made sure that all quotations are in quotation marks and all ideas which are not my own are clearly referenced?
Self-Reflective Learning Assessment

Look back through your Working Journal and chart your progress. Try to identify gaps, limitations and problems that you encountered, but also note your development, strengths and achievements. It is important to be self-critical in a constructive sense.

Record how participation on this module has challenged or confirmed your ideas of black British writing. You may wish to refer to other texts that you have read but are not on this course and discuss how they relate to the issues and texts we have discussed.
What have I found difficult, and can I identify why I had these difficulties?

How successful have I been in addressing these difficulties?

What have I learnt that is useful, interesting or relevant to other modules?
What appear to be my strengths, and what do I still need to work on?

What have I learnt about my own learning and study patterns?