Course Title: Caribbean Literature and Languages in a Global Context: Africa and the Caribbean in the Poetry of Kamau Brathwaite

Course Code: INGL 8080

Number of Class/Credit Hours: 45 Hours/3 Credits

Prerequisites, Corequisites, and Other requirements: None

Description of the Course: This course will explore the poetry of the Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite from his first influential publication Rights of Passage in 1967 to Born of Slow Horses which won the Griffin Prize for Poetry in 2005. Brathwaite was educated in Barbados and England where he felt “very much of an outsider”. Together with Derek Walcott’s, his poetry is at “the heart of the West Indian sensibility” and is defined by its quest for Caribbean identity. Having worked in Ghana between 1957 and 1962, Brathwaite returned to the Caribbean, in Kofi Awoonor’s words, “a poet of the total African consciousness”, ready to engage the new world of the Americas with the old worlds of Africa and Europe. As a poet, Brathwaite has written about the Middle Passage as if it were a constant condition, “an ongoing catastrophe” and yet, at the same time, his poetry emanates “a kind of radiance” combining as it does experiments in language, spelling, typography and “riddims” from folk music and jazz. While the “rootlessness” Brathwaite experienced at Cambridge and the “rootedness” he felt in Accra often segue into a “restlessness” in his native Cow Pastor, his passions are retrieved and renewed by what he calls “Namsetoura” or “Nam”, an “imperishable spirit” which demands that the poet defend his sacred place, his Barbados, his Caribbean, his Africa, his world.

Objectives of the Course: By the end of the course, the students will be able:

1. To develop a knowledge of the topic under discussion as well as how it relates to the overall study of literature in English.
2. To gain a better understanding of texts through the introduction of a topically based study of those texts.
3. To understand how historical context, cultural values, and sites of difference (i.e., class, gender, race, and sexuality) intersect to influence perceptions and interpretations.
4. To explain/enhance critical thinking skills by considering a range of perspectives on significant cultural/social issues related to the study of literature.
5. To develop a better understanding of cultures and the history of ideas as well as the commentary on a contribution of literature to those ideas.
6. To gain a better sense of current trends and topics of interest in studies of poetry.
7. To strengthen research and writing skills.
8. To contribute in an effective way to the integration of fellow students with special challenges and needs into the learning environment.
9. To participate in group work designed to make necessary adjustments for the inclusion of students with special challenges and needs.

Outline of the Course: (Course Content and calendar):

Week 1 (3 Class Hours): Beginnings. A taxonomy of African representation in Caribbean writing. Brathwaite’s concept of ‘Nation-Language’ - an English “more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean” and “like a howl, or a shout, or a machine-gun, or the wind, or a wave.” Kamau Brathwaite and Derek Walcott in context. Brathwaite and his African contemporaries: Kofi Awoonor, Dennis Brutus, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, and the late Christopher Okigbo. Copies of poems by the above will be made available and well as pertinent extracts from Brathwaite’s History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone
Caribbean Poetry (1993). The class will end with a thirty minute video interview conducted by Edward Baugh with Brathwaite in 1991. All photocopies for the course will be from the professor.

Weeks 2, 3, and 4 (9 Class Hours): The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy (1973) comprising Rights of Passage (1967), Masks (1968), and Islands (1969). Under discussion will be the poet’s beginning spiritual journey (Rights of Passage), the pilgrimage into the world of the Ashanti (Masks), and the movement from an almost mythic Africa to an emerging and violent Caribbean (Islands). Critical readings will include Abiola Irele’s “The Return of the Native: Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s Masks,” H.H. Anniah Gowda’s “Creation and the Poetic Development of Kamau Brathwaite”, Timothy J. Reiss’ “Reclaiming the Soul: Poetry, Autobiography, and the Voice of History” and Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s “The Voice of African Presence” (all in World Literature Today 68, No.4, 1994), and essays by Edward Baugh, Kwame Dawes, Simon Gikandi, Micere Githae Mugo, and Gordon Rohlehr in Emily Allen Williams’ The Critical Response to Kamau Brathwaite (2004).

Week 5 (3 Class Hours): “Black and Blues” (1976). The poems in this incantatory volume build on the collections that precede it by offering a voice for the downtrodden. In it, Brathwaite presents a deeply impassioned plea for a Caribbean future of communal spirituality and awareness. Critical readings will include Sophia Lehmann’s “In Search of a Mother Tongue: Locating Home in Diaspora” (Melus 23, No.4, 1998), and essays by William Connor, John Povey, Pamela Mordecai in Emily Allen Williams’ The Critical Response to Kamau Brathwaite (2004).

Week 6, 7, and 8 (9 Class Hours): Ancestors (2001) comprising Mother Poem (1977), Sun Poem (1982), and X/Self (1987). In some respects the most compelling of all Brathwaite’s poetry, these three volumes depict family and social life in Barbados (Mother Poem), ‘growing up’ (Sun Poem), and an awareness of being in the context of world history (X/Self). Ancestors is written in a “spoken” language allowing Brathwaite a “regional” tongue which he constructs in “Sycorax video style” type, unorthodox spelling, and non-standard grammatical usage. The class discussion will focus on Brathwaite’s engagement with the human effects of the Caribbean’s often brutal history. Critical readings will include Joan Dayan’s “Who’s Got History? Kamau Brathwaite’s “Gods of the Middle Passage” (World Literature Today 68, No.4, 1994), Kelly Baker Joseph’s “Versions of X/Self: Kamau Brathwaite’s Caribbean Discourse (Anthurium Vol.1, No.1, Fall 2003), and essays by Laurence Beiner, Stewart Brown, and Louis James in Emily Allen Williams’ The Critical Response to Kamau Brathwaite (2004).

Week 9 (3 Class Hours): Middle Passages (1992), whose publication coincided with the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus’ entry into the his New World, focuses on the distortions engendered by that ‘discovery’. The book is remarkable for its challenges to grammatical and orthographic orthodoxy that Brathwaite developed on his ‘word processor’ by employing a variety of fonts, calligraphies, and symbols. Class discussion will also look at “The Zea Mexican Diary” (1993). In this “indefinable text” – part diary and part memoir, Brathwaite conjures up “helplessly & spasmodically” his beloved wife Doris and tells of her death from cancer. In this mutedly autobiographical work, written in nation-language, Brathwaite offers us a glimpse not only into a poet’s grief but also into the poet himself. Critical readings will include Stewart Brown’s Review of Middle Passages in Poetry Wales 12, No. 1, Gordon Rohlehr’s “Dream Journeys” (World Literature Today 68, No. 4, 1994), and reviews by Cyril Dabydeen, Michael Parker, Louis James, and Albert Mobilo in Emily Allen Williams’ The Critical Response to Kamau Brathwaite (2004).

Week 10 (3 Class Hours): “Trenchtown Rock” (1993). Branded “a rare synaesthetic call and cry rolled into brash typographic droll”, Brathwaite’s incendiary view of the Jamaican experience is arguably one of the most exciting (and apocalyptic) long poems of the last fifty years and is highlighted not only by the stoning death of Mikey Smith but also the environs of Kingston rather than just the Trench Town of Bob Marley and the Wailers’ famous song. The discussion will center on what Brathwaite calls “the Age of Dis. Distress Dispair & Disrespect. Disrupt Dis rupt Distraction”. The critical reading will be from Conversations with Nathaniel Mackey (concerning the change Brathwaite identifies in his work after 1986, specifically the death of his wife, the mudslide at Irish Town that engulfed his house after hurricane Gilbert, and the violent break-in at Brathwaite’s apartment in Marley Manor in 1990).

Weeks 11, 12 (3 Class Hours): “Barabajan Poems: 1492-1992” (1994). Referred to by Elaine Savory as “a magic book”, Brathwaite’s Barabajan Poems - written in the lingo of Caliban and his mother Sycorax, and in the video style - is intensely personal and autobiographical. Like The Zea Mexican Diary, it offers an invaluable insight into
the mind of the ‘poet’ who shares his intellectual and spiritual life by weaving it into aspects of Barbadian culture during the transitional period between colonialism and independence (1966) and after. Critical readings will include Elaine Savory’s “Wordsongs & Wordwounds/ Homecoming: Kamau Brathwaite’s Barabajan Poems, Anne Walmsley’s “Her Stem Singing: Kamau Brathwaite’s Zea Mexican Diary: 7 September 1926- 7 September 1986 (both in World Literature Today 68, No.4), and an essay Rhonda Cobham-Sander in Emily Allen Williams’ The Critical Response to Kamau Brathwaite (2004).

Week 13 (3 Class Hours): “Words Need Love Too” (2000). This book is a personal judgment of Brathwaite’s poetic life which sharpens his sense of “wholeness” (found in the “rootedness” he discovered in Ghana) and marks a turning point in his hope for the Caribbean’s re-creation of its African roots. The book prefices Brathwaite’s later environmental struggles in his native Barbados and builds on his ‘meeting’ with Namsetoura, the “imperishable spirit” of West African folk-tales. After a look at the poems, the class will focus on Brathwaite’s struggle to protect Cowpastor, the estate he lives on in Barbados from government interference. Cowpastor is also the burial ground of many of Brathwaite’s ancestors who were slaves. A number of internet poems and blogs have been generated by the poet’s ‘open letter’ soliciting help for the project. Critical readings will include Anna Recklin’s” Tidalectic Lectures: Kamau Brathwaite’s Prose/Poetry as Sound Space” in Anthurium 1, No.1, Fall 2003 and reviews by June Bobb, Kwame Dawes, Aldon Lynn Nielsen in Emily Allen Williams’ The Critical Response to Kamau Brathwaite (2004).

Week 14 (3 Class Hours): “Born to Slow Horses” (2005). In this last volume to date which won the Griffin Prize in 2006, the judges’ citation said: “Here political realities turn into musical complexities, voices overlap, history becomes mythology, spirits appear in photographs [specifically “Nam”] . . . Brathwaite has invented a new linguistic music for subject matter that is all his own.” Discussion of the book will focus on the poet’s meditations on islands, exile, language, poetic passion, and the events of 9/11. Critical readings will include the judges’ citation for the Griffin Prize and recently published reviews of the book in the London Review of Books, The New York Review of Books, and the Times Literary Supplement.

Week 15 (3 Class Hours): Endings. The course will end with a documentary interview in which Zack Bowen introduces Brathwaite and fellow Caribbean writers: Aurora Ferguson, Sharon Freeman, Cynthia James, and Jean Goulbourne. This will be followed by discussion of Brathwaite’s formidable influence on Caribbean life and letters. Critical readings will include essays by Edward Baugh, John La Rose, and Rex Nettleford in Emily Allen Williams’ The Critical Response to Kamau Brathwaite (2004).

Total for 15 Weeks: 45 Class Hours/3 Credit Hours

Instructional Strategies: A student-centered pedagogy will be used in this class with the students actively engaged in learning processes whereby they can use their existing knowledge from other PhD and MA classes they have taken to throw light on areas of understanding about literature and poetry in particular which they may not have previously explored through the use of such methods as discussion, Socratic questioning, group work, active research, textual analysis, critical analysis of literary and cultural positions etc.

Students with access to Vocational Rehabilitation Services will be asked to contact the professor at the beginning of the semester in order to plan any special arrangements and equipment necessary in accordance with the recommendations of the Office of Challenged Students’ Affairs (OAPI) in the office of the Dean of Students. In addition, any students with special needs will be encouraged to contact the professor.

Required Learning Resources and Facilities:

1. Richardson Seminar Room (English Department) for student research
2. English Department Screening Room for video presentations
3. English Department Laboratory for student access to computers and internet

Evaluation Strategies:

1. Class Participation 20%
2. 2 Oral Reports 20%
3. Annotated Bibliography 20%
4. Final seminar-length research paper  40%

Grading System:  
A=90-100%; B= 80-90%; C=70-79%; D=60-69%; F=0-50%.

Primary Texts:


Select bibliography concerning Edward Brathwaite before his name-change to Kamau Brathwaite:

Mackey, N. “Edward Brathwaite’s New World Trilogy.” Caliban 3 (Spring-Summer 1979), 58-88.
Senenu, K.E. “Brathwaite’s Song of Dispossession.” Universitas I (March, 1969), 59-

Select Bibliography

www.africa.upenn.edu.
www.africadatabase.org.
www.africaexpert.org.
www.africahistory.com


……“Twice Bitten: The Fate of Africa’s Cultural Producers” in *PMLA*, 105, 1 (Jan. 1990), 110-120.


