

INTENSIVE WRITING IN “CULTURAL INTERSECTIONS”

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“Cultural Intersections” will explore the dynamics of cultural reception or the translational dimension of modern culture, particularly the reception of narratives within particular cultures and beyond. The main focus will be the principles that integrate and divide people along the lines of race, class, ethnicity, and culture. How, for instance, do cultural narratives cross local and national boundaries – and with what interpretive consequences? What factors, or intersection of factors, within and beyond the text, account for the manner in which narratives are received or interpreted? To answer these questions, we will take a virtual journey around the world, focusing on the differences and similarities in the reception or analysis of cultural narratives within and beyond their points of origin. Our journey will involve studies of cultural contacts, contexts, and narratives from Africa and the Caribbean, Asia and the Middle East, Europe/the Americas.

While the main objective of the course is to develop or enhance students’ ability for comparative or transnational interpretation, taking into account reception dynamics, “Cultural Intersections” will also be writing intensive. The course will therefore seek to improve students’ writing skills. Three formal writing assignments will be used to assess students’ achievement of this learning outcome.

The first writing assignment will test students’ understanding of critical and analytical terms. Some of the questions that I might ask students to respond to include:

- What is “world literature”?
- Is “world literature” a literary or political concept?
- What is the relation between literary interpretation and cultural reception?

These will be short response assignments of two pages each (six pages in all) in which the ability of students to respond clearly and concisely

to questions of description and definition will be particularly assessed.

The second writing assignment will be a medium-length essay (six pages) that will specifically test students’ analytical skills with respect to their ability and willingness to undertake a text/context analysis of narratives from other parts of the world (Africa and the Caribbean, Asia and the Middle East) in striking ways. Some of the questions I might ask them to respond to include:

- Write a paper arguing against the banning of *Children of the Alley* in Egypt (when it was first published). Your paper should examine the reason(s) for the ban and provide a persuasive counter-argument involving interpretive references to the text.
- With reference to *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* by Art Spiegelman, write a paper discussing the increasing popularity of the graphic novel. Your paper should examine the effect of presenting the story of the Holocaust in the form of a graphic novel, as Spiegelman does in *Maus*.

The specific evaluation criteria will be: knowledge of the subject (or text); effective presentation or structure; and evidence of research.

The third essay assignment will be a long essay (eight pages) that will test students’ comparative skills in relating cultural narratives (and their reception) from one part of the world to another. Some of the questions I might ask them to respond to include:

- Write a report for publication in a US national newspaper adapting (the plot of) *Children of the Alley* by Naguib Mahfouz into an American narrative. Your report should specify what you consider a key theme in the novel and then discuss the ‘replication’ of that theme in an American narrative,

explaining the differences in historical and cultural particulars.

- Using two exemplary narratives from two different continents, write a paper on what you consider the most instructive way to read narratives outside their original cultural contexts. In accounting for your choice, your paper should examine other interpretive possibilities and their limitations in this instance.
- Write an alternative ending for *Children of the Alley* by Naguib Mahfouz, locating the setting of the novel outside Egypt, with a critical prologue or epilogue explaining your imaginative revision of that part of the text (the ending) in relation to its overall structure. The specific evaluation criteria will be: knowledge of the subject (or text); effective presentation or structure; and voice.

Students will also submit a portfolio at the end of the course that will contain the revised first essay assignment, revised based on feedback from me. The specific evaluation criterion for this revised version is the extent of its improvement on interpretation and presentation issues identified

in the previous draft.

My projection is that the process of research and writing will further help students clarify and structure the knowledge that the course will provide. The planned writing assignments particularly expect students to

- read holistically, taking into account both textual and contextual factors in their analysis;
- and to develop or enhance their analytical openness to new ideas and interpretations, relying more on in-depth reflection than popular assumption.

The writing assignments are also planned in such a way that students will progress from simply demonstrating competence in comprehension through text/context analysis aided by research to longer writing assignments that emphasize the individual voice and imagination.

