

## Student-Centered Designs of Pan-African Literature Courses

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A student-centered teaching methodology is an essential ingredient of a successful Pan-African literary course. Using such an approach, I combine reading assignments with journals, film presentations, and lectures in a productive learning environment in which I play the role of invisible facilitator of intellectual exchange. My method incorporates a variety of Pan-African literary and historical works that help students understand the relations between Blacks of Africa and the Diaspora.

### **Defining Pan-Africanism**

Studying Pan-Africanist teaching methodologies requires us to define Pan-Africanism. The term Pan-Africanism describes an intellectual tradition and a political movement which examines the relationships among the history, literature, and cultures of Blacks in Africa and the Diaspora. The term “Black Diaspora” describes the regions outside of Africa where Black people live due to historical forces such as slavery, voluntary migrations, and globalization. In *African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities* (2001), Isidore Okpewho argues that “*diaspora*

represents a global space, a worldwide web, that accounts as much for the mother continent as for wherever in the world her offspring may have been driven by the unkind forces of history” (xiv). These historical forces also include the increasing movement of people, cultures, and knowledge across space.

The concept of “Pan-Africanism” also identifies an ongoing political movement in which Blacks have asking for a fair share in the distribution of the advances of modernity and democracy they helped build. In *African People in the Global Village: An Introduction to Pan-African Studies* (1998), John K. Marah describes the plight of ancestors of these Blacks who were alienated in the “Western city and métropole” during the nineteenth century only to be excluded from their “white brothers and sisters” who had left them “up country, in the village, tilling the soil” of their masters (79). As Marah states, these alienated Blacks invented “Pan-Africanism” as “a psychological response to [this] powerlessness and a desire to act upon the environment in which Africans found themselves, rather than remain the ones being acted upon without meaningful resistance” (80). Tracing this resistance against powerlessness to an earlier period, Victor Oguejiofor Okafor writes in “The Place of Africalogy in the University Curriculum” (1996): “Indeed, as far back as the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, conscious Africans such as Olaudah Equiano had begun to affirm African humanity in the face of assaults from without” (690). This early Pan-Africanism in which Black women such as Phillis Wheatley, Mary Prince, the Hart Sisters also participated had spread across the Americas and Africa by the end of the eighteenth century. Marah writes:

As a group of people barred from the white man's higher places in the United States, the Caribbean Islands, South America, Africa, and elsewhere, a certain racial consciousness began to emerge in the early 1900s that caught the attention of the "talented tenth" on the continents of Europe, America, and Africa. As early as the 1800s Toussaint L'Ouverture, David Walker, and others began to address African people's international conditions. (80)

In the 1960s, a new form of Pan-Africanism developed as a modern political movement in which Blacks in the United States were fighting for recognition of their humanity and intellect in both American society and its academic institutions. This Pan-Africanism developed under the shadows of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and the Black Arts Movement and the Black Panther Movement of the 1960s and early 1970s, leading to the inclusion of the field of African American Studies in mainstream American academic institutions. Thus, as Farah Jasmine Griffin notes, "In the spring of 1968, the Black Student Alliance at Yale University organized a scholarly symposium to explore the debates surrounding the emergence of African American Studies at majority White institutions. The Yale students invited a cross-section of leading scholars and intellectuals, including Harold Cruse, Nathan Hare, Maulana Ron Karenga, and Martin Kilson to debate the politics and scholarly legitimacy of this controversial topic" (xi). This debate led to theories that Black intellectuals such as Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), co-founder of the Black Arts Movement and Maulana Karenga, founder of the US organization, developed against academic perspectives that they viewed as favoring Western-centered point of views. For instance, as

Nagueyalti Warren writes in “Pan-African Cultural Movements: From Baraka to Karenga” (1990), Karenga decried the dismissal of African culture in Eurocentric perspectives and created Kwanzaa, an African American holiday “celebrating aspects of African cultural values and giving attention to the ancestors” (25). On the other hand, Baraka denounced “the slavish imitation and empty rhetoric of too many black writers and artists” of the 1960s and suggested that “the black literati [in the United States] attend political education classes or be dismissed from the struggle as enemy sympathizers” (21). Though they may easily be misread as isolationist or intolerant rhetoric, Karenga’s and Baraka’s arguments reflected the sentiments of a generation of young Black activists who were disappointed by the poverty that racism and limited educational and economic opportunities had imposed on the lives of African Americans. The radicalism of these Blacks produced a field of African American Studies that introduced a new methodology into the American academy: Africalogy. Okafor defines Africalogy, or “Africana studies, as not “simply the study of Black people but the study of African people from an Afrocentric perspective” in terms that engage “the normative and empirical inquiry into the life histories and prospects of peoples of primary African origin and their descent trans-generationally, trans-millennially and universally” (697). Africalogy’s representation of African people in universalist terms has been criticized by Black postmodernist scholars who perceive African-Centered paradigms as antithetical to the multiculturalists’ theorizing of identity as hybrid, broad, multiple, and inclusive.<sup>1</sup> The stereotyping of Afrocentrism as a paradigm that is antithetical to diversity has been detrimental to American academic institutions since it has

allowed the persistent charge of universalism” to veer many scholars away from the complex methods and theories of Africalogy. Okpewho writes:

“Essentialism” has emerged in recent diaspora discourse as an ugly label for any tendency to see the imprint of the homeland or ancestral culture—in this case, Africa—in any aspect of the lifestyles or outlook of African-descended peoples in the western Atlantic world. But we can hardly deny that Africa has had much to do with the ways that New World Blacks have chosen to address the realities before them from the moment they emerged from the ships.

(xv)

Isidore continues: “African-descended Americans found an outlet for reasoning themselves of indigenous values they found lacking in the culture of those who ruled their lives even in freedom” (xv). These Blacks have developed an intellectual Pan-African tradition which grapples with the successes, failures, hope, and disappointments of African-descended people while resisting the demonizing discourses of slavery, racism, and colonialism. Uncovering this Pan-Africanism necessitates a definition of the movement as a both a political struggle and an intellectual tradition. As Ali A. Mazrui points out, “We can imagine intellectualism without Pan-Africanism, but we cannot envisage Pan-Africanism without the intellectualization of the African condition. It is not a historical accident that the founding fathers of the Pan-Africanist movement were disproportionately intellectuals – W.E.B. Du Bois, Kwame Nkrumah, George Padmore, Leopold Senghor and others” (1). From this logic, a Pan-Africanist methodology studies the

major issues confronting Blacks of both Africa and the Diaspora without ignoring the local and transnational realities of these Blacks. In a report entitled *Inclusive Scholarship: Developing Black Studies in the United States* (2007), Farah Griffin reaches a similar conclusion: “As the demographics of the United States change so too does the composition of the Black student population. The field needs to become more inclusive to reflect the multidimensional histories and cultures of that population while not losing sight of the history and specificity of Black experiences and struggles both locally and globally” (235). Using this balanced methodology, I employ a student-centered approach that enhances students’ understanding of Pan-African literature and contemporary issues through exploration of the connections among the literature, history, and folklore of Blacks of the Diaspora and Africa.

## **My Teaching Philosophy**

In the early 1940s, French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre was approached by one of his students who wanted advice on whether to join the Free French Forces and fight the Germans or stay at home with his mother who was afflicted by her elder son’s death in the trenches. If he joined the Forces, the young man could defend his country and avenge his brother’s death. Yet, if he stayed home, he could protect his mother from loneliness and despair. Sartre’s advice to the tormented young man was simple: “You are free, therefore choose—that is to say, invent” (131). My teaching experience has shown me that the best way to instruct students is to follow Sartre’s premise by recognizing their freedom to make their own choices in life. This principle requires that the instructor expose students to a variety of ways of exploring an idea and give them the

freedom to decide which among these methods is more or less effective. In order to allow students to experience this freedom, the instructor should include their input in the process of both syllabus design and classroom learning. The instructor can include the students' voices by asking them the following questions at the beginning of the semester or quarter:

- What topics should or should not be included in the syllabus in order to strengthen or contradict particular themes and issues?
- What types of activities should be organized in or outside of class in the place of others?
- What movies/documentaries should be watched in class in place of others?

Students are more eager to learn and participate actively in a class when they know that the instructor takes their opinions and choices into consideration in the process and structures of the pedagogy. Giving students a voice in the syllabus will help them be accountable for what takes place in the classroom. When both their voice and responsibility are validated, students become eager to discuss controversial themes such as slavery, war, globalization, sexism, feminism, homelessness, and sexual orientation, all of which require them to take positions and defend them firmly and responsibly. No morality, whether of sympathy for or devotion to a cause, race, sex, gender, or other identity should be used to tell students what they ought to do or how they should think. As Sartre points out, "It is I myself, in every case, who have to interpret the signs" (131-132). From this logic, students are the prime interpreters and facilitators of their own learning as they compare and critique texts in social, political, cultural, and economic contexts. Since my primary goal is to help students become conscious of what is happening in a diversity of places and cultures that may differ from theirs, I place a strong emphasis on multiculturalism and

issues related to marginalization, such as race relations, class conflicts, gender struggle, ethnic diversity, sexual orientation, and political institutions in both Pan-African communities and other societies. This inclusive methodology allows students to realize their capacity to think, write, and speak about the human condition. I strive to help students understand the humanities as a means for analyzing the social, political, and cultural forces that shape their lives and those of other members of a diverse world. My use of the humanities as a means for achieving social and political consciousness comes from my belief in Earl Shorris' argument that "if the political life was the way out of poverty, the humanities provided entrance to reflection and the political life" (51-52). Indeed, giving students the opportunity to learn productively prepares them for future positions as leaders, critics, and enhancers of human conditions.

## **My Teaching Methods**

Throughout the years, I have modified my teaching style whenever I discover a strategy that can help me achieve better results with students. For example, seven years ago, I found out that class time was better spent if students were relieved of writing quizzes and asked to produce daily journals instead. In the past, I used to give students a five to seven-minute quiz in the beginning or near the end of a class. I used quizzes because they helped me assess regularly how students read and understood the texts. Quizzes enabled me to evaluate the daily reading performance of students and the difficulties that they faced in their analysis of the texts. However, they were often counter-productive because they usually took a good amount of class time. Alternatively, I realized that asking students to compose a journal about the weekly assigned text(s) would save



me time that I could spend on group work and other participatory activities. In the beginning of each class, I ask each student to submit a journal entry about the text assigned for that day and keep one for themselves as a reference for their group work activities. In the journal, each student is expected to:

- Give a brief and concise summary of the assigned text highlighting the important themes and issues that the author discusses.
- Write a few sentences discussing the important questions and arguments that the text succeeded or failed to analyze.
- Say what makes him/her believe that the author did or did not explore such questions and arguments successfully.
- Explain what the author could have done to make the arguments and questions in his/her text more persuasive.

This type of journal exercise is productive in several ways. First, it gives students the opportunity to spend a good amount of their time doing a written assignment that will be graded and counted toward their final score. Second, the journal-writing exercise allows me to know whether each student reads the assigned text and is therefore ready to participate in class discussions. Third, as I correct each journal, I can give each student feedback on the themes, diction, style, and level of analysis on which they should improve. Fourth, journals help me develop a closer rapport with the students as I find out about their individual needs, ambitions, and goals. Finally, journal-writing exercises help students give free range to their ideas at their discretion as they develop their sense of individuality and independence in both thinking and writing.

After collecting journals at the beginning of every class, I start my lessons with a short verbal interaction with students. I spend the first three minutes of each class trying to establish a casual communication. I often ask students simple questions such as “How was your day?” “Who won the game last night?” “Did anybody watch this new movie starring Denzel Washington or Halle Berry?” These questions help me liven up the atmosphere in the classroom and put every student at ease. Next, I give a short five to seven minutes lecture in which I place the text and themes of the day in their historical, social, and cultural contexts. During the lecture, I ask several broad questions such as “What does the text teach us about the past?” “Is this text going to change how we view things?” “Did the text achieve its main purpose?” “What comments, suggestions, and criticism can we make about the text and the style in which it is written?” These questions help students find possible answers to some of the questions that they will be discussing later in activities: they are put in clusters of three to four people and asked to spend fifteen to twenty minutes exchanging ideas from their journals. At the end of the activity, each student is expected to share his or her findings with the class.

Group work is an effective strategy because it gives each student the opportunity to speak in class, developing individual and oral participation while creating a community and bonding among students. Once they develop friendship and mature rapport with one another, I orient the classroom activities in different formats such as round tables, interviewing, and role-playing in which each participant can speak confidently in front of their classmates, preparing themselves for their research paper presentation at the end of the semester.

A student-centered methodology would be incomplete without hands-on experience. I usually put students in groups of four and ask them to do journalistic or ethnographic interviewing on campus or in their hometown. They conduct interviews on contentious issues such as gun control, abortion, domestic abuse, war, homelessness, reparations for slavery, racial profiling, globalization, and other pertinent topics. Like the in-class activities, these outside exercises require that students share their findings with the class orally and submit their findings in the form of a paper to the instructor. These activities help the students to learn how to apply their knowledge to practical life-related issues.

Yet the core element of my teaching is the use of “invisible facilitation” or the use of a neat balance between intervention and noninterference in the learning process. “Invisible facilitation” is necessary in any kind of productive meeting. In “Collaborative Cultures,” Robert J. Garmston writes: “Facilitators need to intervene when they see that something is happening—or might happen—that could interfere with the group’s effectiveness or development. Knowing when to intervene marks the difference between intrusive and invisible facilitation. This requires not only sensory acuity but also clarity about intentions and possible choices congruent with those intentions” (66). An instructor uses “invisible facilitation” by intruding in the learning process of students only in necessary situations such as clarifying an idea, avoiding digressions, drawing attention to the issues and text(s) under discussion, or asking questions. The “invisible facilitator” does not impose his or her presence in the classroom too much and refrains from telling students how they should think about an idea. As Donald Finkel states in *Teaching With Your Mouth Shut* (2000), a good teacher is one who spends more time listening to what students say and thinking

about what s/he hears than s/he does talking (8). This good teacher speaks only when something leads him or her to a new thought or line of inquiry that enhances the debate without directing it. Invisible facilitation is then a talent one develops by knowing when and when not to exercise one's "know-it-all" authority in the classroom.

## **My Teaching Practices in Specific Pan-African Literature Courses**

Since Pan-African Studies is multidisciplinary, I try to make my course syllabi draw from diverse fields, texts, themes, cultures, places, and regions. This hybrid and heterogeneous selection helps me reflect the pivotal moments in the history and literatures of people of African descent while emphasizing the contributions of peoples from other regions and cultures. In an attempt to expose students to the diversity of Pan-African societies, I make them read fiction, autobiographies, memoirs, short stories, newspaper articles, government documents, commercial films, and documentaries that reflect the complex trajectories of Pan-African peoples in world history.

During the 2002-2003 academic year, I co-taught a course entitled "The American City Since 1945" with Professor Michael Pfeifer and Professor Greg Mullins in which I aimed to expose students to different representations of Black experiences in twentieth-century African American literature from historical, social, cultural, and economic perspectives. In "The American City Since 1945," I was able to do a substantial historical and sociological analysis of the image of urban life in African American literature through lectures such as "The Sociological Perspectives of W.E.B. Du Bois and E. Franklin Frazier about the Great Migration," "The Myth

of the Damaged Black Psyche,” and “Richard Wright and James Baldwin: Father and Son.”

These lectures helped give students background knowledge that facilitated their understanding of the works of African American literature that we assigned. These works included Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) and Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1958), Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) and John Edgar Wideman’s *Brothers and Keepers* (1984). These works expose students to literary Pan-Africanism since they examine the relationships between African Americans and Africans from literary perspectives. *Native Son* suggests the influence of the stereotyping of Africa in 1930s American culture on African Americans through the character of Bigger Thomas who prefers to watch a movie entitled *The Gay Woman* (which shows clothed and happy white men and women) to *Trader Horn* (which reveals naked and angry African men and women) (35-36). Bigger’s dismissal of *Trader Horn* suggests his rejection of African tribalism and Wright’s own discomfort about an African culture that Westerners perceived as “exotic” and “primitive,” as I have pointed out elsewhere.

In a similar vein, *A Raisin in the Sun* introduces students to Pan-Africanism because it explores the relationships between African Americans and Africans. First, the play identifies a significant strain of African American pessimism about Africa. Second, it qualifies this pessimism by depicting positive cultural and intellectual relationships between African Americans and Africa. Third, it discusses the role of independence in the destiny of Africa. The play presents an image of Africa that was current among many African Americans and African political leaders during the 1950s, at a time when many African countries were being granted their independence by Europe. At the middle of this image lies the ignorance of many African

Americans of that decade about Africa, as Hansberry shows in the dialogue in which Mama, Beneatha's mother, confounds Nigeria with Liberia (56), gives money at church to help save Africans from heathenism (57), and naively admits that "I think it's so sad the way our American Negroes don't know nothing about Africa 'cept Tarzan" (64). By allowing students to watch the film version of *A Raisin in the Sun* and compare its representation of the relations between African Americans with the textual depiction of these same relations, I give them the opportunity to understand the complexity of Pan-Africanism in the play.

Moreover, in a Postcolonial Literature class that I co-taught with Professor Therese Saliba, I developed similar Pan-Africanist perspectives. My primary objective in this course was to draw from my expertise in African Studies and African Francophone literature and explore connections between the postcolonial literature and history of people of African and Arab descent. Reading through the evaluations of my teaching, I realized that students fathomed the impact of colonialism and imperialism in the literature, history, and culture of Africa and the Arab world that I wanted them to understand. In their final projects, a few students in my seminar used this awareness as a tool for understanding anticolonial resistance in Jamaica, Ireland, India, and South Africa.

The books I assigned in Postcolonial Literature included: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1959), Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1980), Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955), Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1962), Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), and Therese Kuoh-Moukoury's *Essential Encounters* (2002). Reading and analyzing these texts allows students to

understand various ways in which the conditions and identities of postcolonial blacks in Africa and the Western world have been theorized. *Discourse on Colonialism* gives students the conceptual tools and historical background they need to assess the ambivalent representations of Africa in *The Heart of Darkness*. Moreover, Césaire's book helps students understand that colonization was "neither evangelization, nor a philanthropic enterprise, nor a desire to push back the frontiers of ignorance, disease, and tyranny, nor a project undertaken for the greater glory of God, nor an attempt to extend the rule of law" (32). As Césaire suggests, colonization is the opposite of "civilization" since it is a brutal attempt "to extend to a world scale" the competitions of the "antagonistic economies" of the Western colonizers through murder, piracy, gold-digging, appetite, and force (32-34). Denouncing this oppression, Césaire says that "The colonialists may kill in Indochina, torture in Madagascar, imprison in Black Africa, [and] crack down in the West Indies" (32), not knowing how such oppression "*decivilize*" and "brutalize" them "in the true sense of the word" (35). Césaire's arguments provide historical and theoretical frameworks that enable students to discuss the representation of colonialism in postcolonial literature.

Another course in which I used a Pan-Africanist methodology was a class called "The Folk: Power of an Image" that I co-taught in Fall 2003 and Winter 2004 with Professor Patricia Krafcik and Professor Michael Pfeifer. In this course, I examined the subversive role of folklore in African and African American literature, history, and culture. First, I delivered three lectures respectively entitled "Introduction to African Peoples and Cultures;" "The Status and Functions of the African Griot;" and "Africanity, Nationalism, and Culture Through South Africa" in which

I explored selected African writers' use of traditions, epics, oral literature, and history in order to authenticate the history of their people and resist European distortions and under-representation of African cultures. Later in the course, I gave three lectures entitled "Social and Cultural Discourse in Jean Toomer's *Cane*," "The Negritude Movement and its Relationships with the Harlem Renaissance," "Negotiating Hybridity: Tradition, Modernity, and Exile in *The Ambiguous Adventure*" and "The image of the Folk in African Music." I focused on representations of identity and folklore in African American and African cultures and the dilemmas that racism and colonization have created among Blacks in the United States and in Africa during the first half of the twentieth century. I supported the themes that I discussed in my lectures with books and films about African American and African literature, culture, and folklore. I was pleased with the lectures I delivered and the materials that I assigned because they did what I had expected them to do in the course. First, my lectures placed the works of African and African American culture I assigned in the social, political, and economic context out of which they evolved. Second, the lectures and materials empowered students to discuss the worldviews, cosmologies, and concerns of Blacks in West Africa and the United States.

Moreover, in "The Folk: Power of an Image" course, I helped design an assignment in which students are asked to collect five folkloric materials such as legends, proverbs, riddles, jokes, customs, beliefs, or folksongs and write a paper that analyzes the significance of such lore in the society and culture of the people from whom they originate. The exercise had six parts that included finding the following:



- *Informant:* What is the name of the person who told you about the item? Where is he/she from? What is his/her age, gender, and schooling background? What are his/her ethnic, family, or religious ties? What are his/her occupation, hobbies, and relation (if any) to you (the collector)?
- *Title:* What is the item called? –or, if it does not have a title, how would you best label it?
- *Genre:* In what genre of folklore does the item belong? In other words, is it a legend, a riddle, a belief, a folksong, etc.?
- *Context:* In what circumstances are the traditions performed? For which purpose are they told? What is the meaning in the culture of the informant?
- *Text:* The item, quoted verbatim or sketched/photographed as is?
- *Texture:* How did the person perform the item?

In the end of the quarter, the students presented their findings to their seminar and had the opportunity to describe their experience with interviewing people and collecting rich examples of folkloric materials from many parts of the world. In their self-evaluations, many students found this Folklore Collection Project to be a very rich experience in their academic and personal growth. Students also appreciated the films that I had shown in the class. These films included *Aimé Césaire*, *Zora Is My Name*, *Beloved*, *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Biography in Four Voices*, and *Mandabi*. These films helped students understand the cultures and the social, political, and

economic conditions in particular countries of the Black Diaspora and Africa that they read about, giving them clear representations of the ideas that we theorized and contextualized in lectures, books, and articles.

In Spring 2004, I taught another class entitled “Africa and the Black Atlantic World.” This course allowed me to share with students my research on African and Black Diasporan literature that I have built in my publications and conference presentations. In return, the students learned about the field of Black Atlantic Studies by tilling their own garden and growing as disciples of this recent field. As one of these disciples myself, I introduced students to the major theories, methods, and practices in Black Atlantic Studies. Given the largeness of Africa and the Black Diaspora, I was very selective about the readings, films, lectures, and guest lecturers; I chose to focus on African, African American, and Caribbean cultures only. The strict selection helped me introduce students to the works of pioneer Black Atlantic scholars such as Paul Gilroy, Paul Lovejoy, Laura Chrisman, and Stuart Hall. Inspired by the pluralism of the discipline, I planned the Black Atlantic course as an exploration of race, class, gender, sexuality, and generation gaps in African American, African, and Caribbean historical and literary writings about Africa. By centering the discussions and papers on the discrete representation of Africa, I enabled students to examine key themes such as the African slave trade, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonialism, and racism in historical and literary perspectives. Listening to and discussing a variety of musical genres including African traditional and modern rhythms, Salsa, Reggae, Meringue, Blues, and Samba, students learned about the diverse cultures that have roots in

Africa. This diversity was also apparent in both the films we watched and the books we discussed; a complete list may be found in the supplementary materials.

The number of works might seem large for one single class of a traditional college or university. Yet it was about the normal amount of books that students at The Evergreen State College, where I used to teach before I moved to Kent State University, would read and study during a quarter. Students at Evergreen take one course only during a full semester in which they study materials that are normally spread over three courses at a traditional school. Rather than assigning works in vain, I made sure that each item on my list was properly read and analyzed by students. Each book was discussed in a seminar in which 24 students met with me on a rotating basis once a week in groups of six. Each week, every student made a copy of their essay and distributed it to each member of their group. Each member could then correct their peer's essay and submit it to their author on the day of the writing seminar when the instructor would return his corrected paper too. These seminars allowed the instructor to assess the skills and collaborative capacity of each student while giving them more personalized support throughout the duration of the course.

In addition, the students of the Black Atlantic course met with me each week during a lecture in which I contextualized each assigned work by discussing the intellectual, social, economic, and political contexts out of which the text. These weekly lectures were alternated with film viewings and student group presentations about the movies and documentaries. These presentations allowed students to bond, learn from one another, and draw significant information

about the filmmakers' and actors' biographies and the critical receptions of their works to supplement the lectures and seminars.

The works listed above were analyzed via reading assignments, question and answer homework, and research papers. The question and answer homework consisted of asking students to compose five discussion questions in thoughtful response to the week's readings for each seminar, bringing a copy for me and one for themselves. Students used these questions as prompts for sharing ideas with their peers and contributing to seminars. This teaching strategy that I learned and enhanced from teaching with Professor Michael Pfeifer, Professor Greg Mullins, Professor Therese Saliba, and Professor Patricia Krafcik at Evergreen State College really works since it assures that each student comes to class with information s/he can share comfortably. The exercise also allows students to have an archive of commentaries about the assigned texts from which they can easily draw to synthesize what they learned from the semester and prepare a research paper.

In a similar vein, I gave students homework that allowed them to analyze the assigned literature and films in their essays and research papers. A typical essay assignment can be found in the supplementary materials. This kind of assignment encourages students to pay attention to the intellectual values of the films and documentaries they watch and identify the relationships between such visual aids and the conventional literature they read. The films complement the writings by giving students real sights and sounds that are missing in books. For instance, by watching Gates's *Wonders of the African World*, one sees images of a modern African American scholar (Gates) traveling to historical sites in contemporary Mali, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and

other parts of Africa and asking people what they think of African Americans. As Gates says in the book of the same title as his film, *Wonders of the African World* seeks to uncover “So much of the history of Africa’s civilizations [which] has been ignored, or destroyed, or devalued as a consequence of European slavery and colonization” (146). Moreover, the film dispels the imagery of Africa as a primitive and backward continent which prevents students from knowing the modernity and progress that Africans have achieved in the past centuries and have been reinventing and improving since the formal end of colonization in their continent. Africa’s own modernity is apparent in the contemporary cultures in major African cities in which Hip-Hop, Reggae, Blues have been harmoniously syncretized with African popular music in modern cities where rich popular cultures have strived since the middle of the twentieth century.

Another factor that made the student’s intellectual journey pleasurable was the fact that four guest lecturers shared their work with them during the quarter. Students were able to work with Professor Ngugi Wa Thiong’O, who is the most prominent African literary critic and author; Kibibi Monie, who is the Executive Director of Nu Black Arts West Theatre in Seattle; Professor Josaphat Balegamire, the Director of Africa Tomorrow, a Geneva-headquartered organization which fights for the rights of indigenous communities in the Congo-Basin region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC); and Alex Halkin, who is the founding director of the Chiapas Media Project (CMP).

On May 4, 2004, Kibibi, accompanied by Demene Hall, her colleague, gave a lecture and workshop entitled “Journeys Home” in which she talked about the work that her association has done to enhance the lives of people in the African American community of Seattle and in an

African community in Ghana. Kibibi gave many examples such as the promotion of literacy, the use of arts in education, and the donation of technical facilities and support such as computers to young people in Seattle and in Ghana. Kibibi also discussed cooperation between the Nu Black Arts West Theatre in Seattle and the National Theatre of Ghana on possible strategies for enhancing the education of underprivileged youth through the teaching of arts. Kibibi's talk was beneficial to students from many perspectives. Besides the obvious fact that it helped students be aware of the change that can be brought about through the pragmatic actions and will of individuals, the talk illustrated the importance of Africa in the lives of African Americans, which was discussed in many of our readings and films. By listening to Kibibi's own description of her trips to Ghana, students were able to better understand some of the ideas and contexts that Gates represents in *Wonders of the African World*.

Like Kibibi's, Professor Wa Thiong'O's presentation was very crucial in the learning of the students of "Africa and the Black Atlantic World." Given on Thursday, May 13, 2004, in Lecture Hall 3 of Evergreen State College, Professor Wa Thiong'O's talk was on the use of language in resistance to political, economic, and social colonialisms. Professor Wa Thiong'O's presentation allowed students to learn about colonialism and the dominance of European languages over native traditional languages in Africa and the subsequent social, political, and economic inequalities that resulted from them. Discussing his own experiences with imprisonment and exile, Professor Wa Thiong'O showed students the drastic effects that the legacy of colonialism has had on Africa and its intellectuals. Professor Wa Thiong'O also talked about the novels he has published, reading from his first book *Weep Not Child*. Listening to

Professor Wa Thiong’O, our students had an intimate experience with African literature and the problems it seeks to dismantle.

The third guest presentation to the students in the “Africa and the Black Atlantic World” course was given by Professor Balegamire who talked about strategies of conflict resolution, management, and sustainability that his organization is promoting in the DRC, which is part of the African Great Lakes region (including Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, and Uganda). According to Professor Balegamire, understanding the local particularities of these regions will help create peace in the region and facilitate the work of international organizations and non-governmental agencies working in the region. Like the other presentations, Professor Balegamire’s lecture was crucial because it helped students understand the problems that Central Africans are facing as a result of tensions between ethnic groups that resulted from colonialism and its aftermath. By talking about this predicament, Professor Balegamire allowed our students to put the ideas in their readings in concrete contexts.

The fourth guest lecture was given by Alexandra Halkin. Alex discussed her work that her organization does in helping create indigenous people and *campesinos* in Chiapas and Guerrero, Mexico by producing alternative media in the context of the current political climates and human rights violations in the regions. After a brief talk, Alex showed a film entitled *Song of the Earth: Traditional Music from the Highlands of Chiapas* that her organization produced as a means to create awareness about the lives and resistance of Zapatistas in Chiapas. The film was also about the importance of music as means for cultural survival and resistance against oppression. One memorable scene was when one Zapatista wearing a mask said about the young generation,

“Some don’t like the true music of the community . . . They want to forget it. Their hearts are with the music from the West.” These statements resonate with the theme of generation gap and cultural change that some of the books we read examine in the context of Africa’s troubling relations with its Diaspora. Seeing a similar dynamic in a Mexican community, which has a Black-Diasporic community that needs to be studied, was very important for students. At the end of the screening, a few students asked thoughtful questions and made attentive comments about both the documentary and Alex’s work. This session and the ones discussed above were part of the most memorable experiences of my teaching career.

### **Pan-Africanism as Knowledge Expansion**

In my teaching, I assign pivotal works that allow students to discover or expand their knowledge of Black intellectual and literary history. Although they focus on the relations between Africa and the Black Atlantic world, the works that I assign in my Pan-African literature courses are not essentialist, anti-modern, or narrow-minded. They expand students’ knowledge by allowing them to deepen their understanding of race, class, gender, sexuality, or other themes from their own vantage points. These students allow me to put my Pan-Africanist philosophy of education in practice while discovering and adopting new strategies of teaching from my colleagues and integrating them into my own. In doing so, I am able to disrupt the level of comfort and individualism that I used to cherish in traditional classrooms and learn to experience a more challenging learning system in which success depends on collaboration with colleagues and students for the fulfillment of the goals of each course.



**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> See Babacar M'Baye. "African-centered and Postmodernist Interpretations of Pan-Africanism." *Directions in Cultural History: UCLA Historical Journal*. 21 (2005-2006): 80-96; Kwame A. Appiah. "The Multicultural Mistake." In *Border Texts: Cultural Readings for Contemporary Writers*. Ed. Randall Bass. Boston: Houghton, 1999. 629-633; Gerald Early. "Understanding Afrocentrism: Why Blacks Dream of a World Without Whites." In *Border Texts: Cultural Readings for Contemporary Writers*. Ed. Randall Bass. Boston: Houghton, 1999. 618-629.

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