

UNWORLDLY ISLANDS

Cultures of Sovereignty After the Caribbean



Myrna Báez, *María Eugenia en el paisaje*

CSLC 503: Introduction to Comparative Studies in Culture

Instructor: Ronald Mendoza-de Jesús, Ph.D.

Class Time: Tuesdays 6:00-9:00 pm

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

If we follow Walter Benjamin when he argues, in his theses *On the Concept of History*, that “there is never a document a culture that is not at the same time a document of barbarity,” then the task of an introduction to the discipline that has come to be known as “Cultural Studies” should be understood as a propaedeutic into the *legibility* of barbarity. Furthermore, if such barbarity, as the context of Benjamin’s seventh thesis makes clear, is indexed to the most fundamental event and process of political life—namely, the establishment of hegemony over other peoples who become political *others* through the very antagonism that drives the constitution of a sovereign, imperialist *body politic*—then there is perhaps no place as singularly marked by the barbarity of *La Conquista* than the Antillean archipelago, where every single document of Caribbean culture is written in the ink of European and North-American domination. Culture would thus be irremediably a sovereign affair.

This course takes the arguments stated above as its guiding premises in order to propose a textual trajectory that seeks to accomplish at least five objectives, at three different levels of generality:

First, at its most formal and disciplinary level, this course will at least attempt to offer a very partial introduction to that intellectual event which has come to be known as “cultural studies.” To do so, we will take one of his main exponents, Stuart Hall, as our guide. We will profit from the recent publication of a series of lectures that Hall gave in 1983 that were meant as an introduction to what at that time was still an emerging field, relying on the specific “theoretical history” that he offers in order to at least begin to grasp the importance of three basic and interrelated concepts for the constitution of cultural studies: 1) culture, 2) hegemony, and 3) ideology.

Second, we will turn to the Caribbean to make the case that the cultural production of the region provides a privileged site for the constitution of the basic political and epistemic goals of the cultural studies program. Through a careful examination of authors such as Suzanne and Aimé Césaire, Fanon, Retamar, Glissant, and Wynter, we will retrace a Caribbean lineage of cultural studies that continues to provide insights that might exceed the reach of more Anglo-centric configurations of cultural critique.

Thirdly, and more specifically still, we will place at the core of our examination two conceptual figures or images: the world and the islands. We will try to reconfigure a certain antagonism that emerges between these two notions in Caribbean culture, taking Jacques Derrida’s dictum “there is no world, there are only islands” (and Mara Negrón’s commentary of this phrase) as our guiding motif. We will meditate on the untranslatability of Derrida’s formula: the French *immonde*, as the Spanish *inmundo*, refer not only to the negation of the world, but also to the absence of cleanliness, to a condition that is opposed to purity, property, propriety; heard in this way, the English word *unworldly* acquires the color of the irremediably abject, of what ought to be rejected, thrown to the other side of the world. Reconstructing the antagonism between those thinkers who take the side of the world and those who insist on thinking in the name of an enduring and irremediable insularity will lead us to at least reckon with a possible reconfiguration of the *political* valences of Caribbean cultural and theoretical production. Should we not recognize that the politics of worldling, regardless

of how open its totality might be conceived, is complicit with the production of *unworldliness*, so that the desire to *build a world* might itself harbor the very dangerous barbarity that the construction of a proper world is meant to curtail? Here, we will dwell on a certain divergence that can be remarked among writers like Glissant and Wynter, on the one hand, and Derrida and Kincaid, on the other.

Fourth, the conflict between the world and the island points to another site of theoretical and political divergence that will be of interest for us, namely, the relation between deconstruction and decolonization. Taking a relatively unread text of Derrida from 1978 in which he addresses the affinities between decolonization and deconstruction, as well as his most famous *Monolingualism of the Other*, we will try to understand *otherwise* the Benjaminian injunction to regard culture as evincing structurally the barbarity of colonization and the coloniality of barbarism.

Finally, we will also reflect on the role of literature in the constitution of this somewhat unorthodox genealogy of cultural studies. Taking as our point of departure Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, relayed through Aimé Césaire's rewriting of it, and finishing with Kincaid's *A Small Place*—the question of the literary within culture will pose itself again and again, beyond the usual common places that have calcified the reach of cultural studies to the examination of primarily non-canonical works of literature.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Students will be required to submit a final, article-long paper (20-30 pages) at the end of the semester. Students are also required to do at least one oral presentation during the semester of 20 minutes (8-10 pages). Students are encouraged to use their presentations as the basis of their final papers.

READINGS

FIRST WEEK: APPROACHING THOSE UNWORLDLY ISLANDS

Primary Sources:

1. Martin Heidegger, "Language," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*
2. Jacques Derrida, "First Session" in *Beast and the Sovereign II*
3. Mara Negrón, "Why Do Some Love Islands? Why Others Don't?"

Secondary Sources:

1. Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death*
2. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalization*

SECOND WEEK: OF ORIGINS, DESERT ISLANDS, AND OTHER MYTHS

Primary Sources:

1. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*
2. Gilles Deleuze, "Desert Islands" in *Desert Islands and Other Texts*

THIRD WEEK: SOVEREIGN INSULARITIES

Primary Sources:

1. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*
2. Jean Bodin, *On Sovereignty*
3. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*

FOURTH WEEK: CALIBAN'S REVENGE

Primary Sources:

1. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*
2. Roberto Fernández Retamar, "Caliban: Notes Toward a Discussion of Culture in Our America," in *Caliban and Other Essays*
3. Silvia Federici, Selections from *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*

FIFTH WEEK: METHODOLOGICAL INTERLUDE 1

WHAT IS *CULTURE* FOR CULTURAL STUDIES? HALL

Primary Sources:

1. Stuart Hall, "Lectures 2 and 3," in *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*
2. Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," in *Culture and Materialism*
3. Claude Lévi-Strauss, Selections from *Totemism*

SIXTH WEEK: A CALIBANNISTIC LANGUAGE? THE CÉSAIRE'S EVENT

Primary Sources:

1. Aimé Césaire, *A Tempest*
2. Suzanne Césaire, *The Great Camouflage*

SEVENTH WEEK: METHODOLOGICAL INTERLUDE 2

HEGEMONY AND CULTURE: HALL

Primary Sources:

1. Stuart Hall, "Lectures 7 and 8," in *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*
2. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*
3. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)" in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*

EIGHT WEEK: CULTURE AND DECOLONIALITY 1

FANON

Primary Sources:

1. Frantz Fanon, "Chapters 1 and 4," in *Wretched of the Earth*

NINTH WEEK: CULTURE AND DECOLONIALITY 2
DERRIDA (Deconstructing Decolonization/Decolonizing Deconstruction)

Primary Sources:

1. Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*
2. ———, “The Crisis of Philosophical Teaching,” in *Who’s Afraid of Philosophy? Right to Philosophy I*

TENTH WEEK: SPRING BREAK

ELEVENTH WEEK: SEMINAR CANCELLED

TWELTH WEEK: CULTURE AND DECOLONIALITY 3
WYNTER

Primary Sources:

1. Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations,” in *On Being Human as Praxis*

MAKE-UP SESSION: METHODOLOGICAL INTERLUDE 3 (DATE AND LOCATION TBD)
BENJAMIN

Primary Sources:

1. Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*
2. ———, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility*

THIRTEENTH WEEK: CULTURE AND DECOLONIALITY 4
GLISSANT

Primary Sources:

1. Édouard Glissant, “Introductions,” “Dispossession,” “The Caribbean Experience,” and “A Caribbean Future,” in *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*

FOURTEENTH WEEK: METHODOLOGICAL INTERLUDE 4
SOVEREIGNTY, POSESSION, IPSEITY

Primary Sources:

1. Jacques Derrida, Selections from *The Politics of Friendship*
2. ———, Selections from *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*
3. Émile Benvéniste, “Hospitality,” in *Indo-European Language and Society*

FIFTEENTH WEEK: CARIBBEAN WORLDS
GLISSANT

Primary Sources:

1. Édouard Glissant, Selections from *Poetics of Relation*

SIXTHTEENTH WEEK: CARIBBEAN UNWORLDS
KINCAID

Primary Sources:

1. Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place*

Secondary Sources:

1. Mara Negrón, "Islands-Worlds"

Final Paper Due: May 10, 2019