

POLITICS AND THE NOVEL

COLT 475, 22064
Fall 2020
MW 8:30-9:50am (Zoom)

Professor Sarah Skillen
Office Hours: M 2:00-3:00 pm
Email: skillen@usc.edu



Description:

What is politics, and what constitutes a political action? Can a novel from the nineteenth century still be political today, and how can a monster story or science fiction be political? In this course, we will read novels alongside political and literary theory to ask what possible political futures these novels imagine for their time and for ours. The texts draw us into a transatlantic conversation taking place over centuries that challenges the reader to

consider questions of activism and political alienation. Together we will investigate the political claims being made by these authors, but also the way in which the novel is and continues to enact its own politics. Voices arise in these texts that are or would have been denied speech, those excluded from representation within the political sphere because of their gendered, racial, sexual, or linguistic otherness. We will engage those who are made invisible, untranslatable or illegible to their sociopolitical context, who might even have remained so to the authors that put them to paper. The novel is a space in which these speaking bodies gain purchase within a political and social context that has denied them speech. At the same time, the novel enacts and participates in its own erasures and annihilations. This course will chart the politics of abolition in the United States and the Caribbean, as well as contemporary novels on the postcolonial and immigration.

Image: Xu Bing, “Book from the Sky,” ca. 1987–91. Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin (June 19, 2016 – January 22, 2017).

Schedule:

I. Speaking Beings

WEEK 1:

M, August 17: Introduction

Discuss *Book from the Sky*

Begin reading, Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (pp. 3-14) *available online through library

W, August 19

Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (pp. 15-71)

*****Students select date and topic for oral presentation**

WEEK 2:

M, August 24

Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (pp. 75-160)

Secondary Readings:

Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of Medusa," *The University of Chicago Press*, pp. 875-893 (pdf available online and through library)

W, August 26

Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (pp. 165-242)

WEEK 3:

M, August 31

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1831), Introduction-Chapter XII *pdfs available online

Secondary Readings:

Jacques Rancière, *Dis-Agreement*, Translation by Julie Rose, Preface and Chapter 1 (pdf available online)

W, September 2

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1831), Chapter XII-end

*****Abstract due**

II. Untranslatable Stories

WEEK 4:

M, September 7 (**Labor Day, No Classes**)

W, September 8

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1831), Chapter XII-end

WEEK 5:

M, September 14

Claire de Duras, *Ourika* (1823) (not required reading)

Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, *Sab* (1841) (not required reading)

Secondary Readings:

Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, "Introduction" (pdf available through library)

W, September 16

Legitimacy and nation, readings from nineteenth-century Cuban legal cases for legitimization (pdf available on Blackboard)

WEEK 6:

M, September 21

Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (1979), pp. 9-107 (available online through library)

Secondary Reading:

Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, "Open Boat," (pdf available online)

W, September 23

Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (1979), pp. 108-188

III. Isolation, Exploitation, Quarantine

WEEK 7:

M, September 28

Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (1979), pp. 188-end

*****Short paper due / Midterm**

W, September 30

Rosario Ferré, “The Youngest Doll,” translated by Diana Vélez (1986) (pdf available through library)

Secondary Readings: Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, “Introduction” (pdf available through library)

WEEK 8:

M, October 5

Severo Sarduy, *Beach Birds* (1993), Ch. 1-5, pp. 9-41

Secondary Readings:

Guillermina De Ferrari, *Vulnerable States*, Ch 2: “Illness and Utopia in Severo Sarduy’s *Pajaros de la Playa*,” pp. 81-103 (pdf available through library)

W, October 7

Severo Sarduy, *Beach Birds* (1993), Ch. 6-15, pp. 45-119

WEEK 9:

M, October 12

Severo Sarduy, *Beach Birds* (1993), Ch. 16-end, pp. 123-167

W, October 14

Reinaldo Arenas, *Old Rosa* (1994), “Arturo, The Brightest Star,” pp. 49-104

***** Final paper proposal and annotated bibliography due**

IV. Exile and Border Crossing

WEEK 10:

M, October 19

N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (2016), Prologue-Ch. 9, pp. 1-171 *available online through library

W, October 21

N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (2016), Ch. 10-Ch. 16, pp. 171-296

WEEK 11:

M, October 26

N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (2016), Ch. 17-end, pp. 297-449

W, October 28

Valeria Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive* (2019), Part I-Box 4, pp. 5-146

WEEK 12:

M, November 2

Valeria Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive* (2019), Box 4-Continental Divide, pp. 148-260

W, November 4

Valeria Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive* (2019), Continental Divide-Polaroids, pp. 261-350

V. Conclusion

WEEK 13:

M, November 9

Workshop final papers and final paper presentations

W, November 11

Workshop final papers and final paper presentations

(Classes End, November 13)

(Study Days, November 14-16)

(Exams, November 17-24)

*****FINAL PAPER DUE 11/23*****

Course Requirements:

- 15 % Abstract
- 15% Short paper / Midterm (4-5 pp. each)
- 10% Participation
- 20% Blackboard reading posts
- 15% Presentation
- 25% Final Paper (13-15 pp. *or* 8-10 pp. with presentation)

Synchronous / Asynchronous:

- Classes will be conducted in two modalities according to student accessibility and preference.
- All students will be required to complete the readings, discussion posts, and any other assignments prior to class.
- Synchronous participation requires that a student attend the live class period (8:30-9:50am) on Mondays and Wednesdays. All synchronous sessions are recorded (per university policy and in order to make the class accessible asynchronously).
- If a student is unable to or chooses not to participate in the synchronous session, they may participate asynchronously. This means watching/listening to/reading the transcript for the recorded synchronous session and completing the alternative assignment. This alternative assignment is meant to supplement whatever discussion took place in class and will usually consist of a brief written response to the class discussion.

Assignments:

- I. Reading responses:
 - Students are expected to have completed all readings prior to class and have thoroughly engaged with the text and be prepared to discuss it with their fellow students. In addition to completing the readings for each course period, students are required to complete a brief analysis/response, including one question to be discussed in class. This response will be submitted online to the corresponding Blackboard Discussion Board by 11:59 PM the night before class. Completion of these responses is worth 20% of the student's final grade.
- II. Participation:
 - Participation is one of the most crucial elements of this course. Students are expected to interact and discuss actively with each other (in discussion posts, break-out rooms, group assignments, class discussion, etc.). Students must demonstrate that they have carefully read and considered each text and must push themselves to ask questions of each other and challenge their readings. In order to foster a nurturing and exciting learning environment, students are expected to be respectful of their colleagues, of differing opinions, and are encouraged to affirm each student's/interlocutor's value and personhood. At the beginning of the semester we will work together to draft a code of ethics for course discussions. Participation is worth 10% of the final grade.

III. Written Assignments:

- Abstract: Students will write a 250 word abstract for an upcoming academic conference. We will discuss strategies and methods of abstract-writing, and the abstracts will be work-shopped in class/on Blackboard before receiving their final grade. This abstract need only be hypothetical and is not required to reflect their final paper project. This is worth 15% of the final grade.
- Short paper: In this essay, I ask students to think about the contents of the course within a wider perspective. Students will be asked to choose one text from the course that will stand as the central interlocutor in their paper, though they may, of course, draw other texts into the dialogue of the paper. I then expect students to bring this central text into discussion either with a subject they are studying outside the course or an issue from daily life and the current political climate. I want students to reflect upon the ways in which they read this text in the world around them and question the tensions it raises. This is a 4-5 page paper and is worth 15% of the student's final grade.
 - o This paper may be substituted with a midterm exam. Students will vote between midterm and paper. This open-book exam will take the place of our class period and will require 1 hour and 20 minutes to complete. Students will be presented with a set of 3 optional questions and they may choose 2 of the three to answer during this period. There will also be one mandatory question that functions as a personal reflection upon the course.
- Final paper: The final paper is a scholarly research paper of the student's choosing.
 - o Students will begin by composing a short research proposal (2-3 pages) including an annotated bibliography, which will be worth 5% of the final grade.
 - o Each student is also required to make an appointment with me (Zoom) to discuss the proposal. At this point, students must identify the kind of paper they will be writing. They have the option of writing a 13-15 page seminar paper that will be workshopped on the last day of class, or an 8-10 page conference paper that they will present on the last day of class in a mock conference setting (this presentation can also be pre-recorded).
 - o Students will then have finals week to edit and refine their papers, which they will turn in to me via email during our scheduled final exam period. This will comprise 20% of the final grade.

IV. Presentation:

- Each student is required to give one presentation during the course. The student will pick a text of interest to them and come to class prepared to give a 10-15 minute presentation on the text (this can be done live or prerecorded). These presentations will be scheduled during the second class period after students have had a chance to review the syllabus and consider their topics. In the presentation students will provide a brief background covering anything from the historical context of the text, a breakdown of its intellectual field and/or movement, to the biography of its author. The student will then briefly

summarize the text. The bulk of the presentation should come in the form of analysis and an outline for discussion. The student will then provide the class with at least three discussion questions or an activity for breakout rooms, as well as an alternative assignment for asynchronous participation. This presentation is worth 15% of the final grade.

Texts:

Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019)

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1831)

Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (1979)

Rosario Ferré, "The Youngest Doll" (1986) **Spanish title: "La muñeca menor"

Severo Sarduy, *Beach Birds* (1993) **Spanish title: *Pájaros de la playa*

Reinaldo Arenas, *Old Rosa* (1994) **Spanish title: *Arturo, la estrella más brillante*

N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, (2015)

Valeria Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive* (2019)

* *Schedule and assignments subject to change at professor's discretion.*

***LAIC students will read texts in their original Spanish when available and will complete all assignments and exams (written and oral) in Spanish.*

Student Services and Academic Conduct

COVID-19 Resources: <https://coronavirus.usc.edu/>

Students with Disabilities:

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible.

DSP is located at:
3601 Watt Way
Grace Ford Salvatori (GFS) 120
Los Angeles, CA 90089
DSPPFrontDesk@usc.edu
(213) 740-0776

DSP Testing Center
910 Bloom Walk
Seaver Science Library (SSL) 301
Los Angeles, CA 90089
DSPTestingServices@usc.edu
(213) 821-9620

Disability Services and Programs (DSP) is the unit at USC responsible for ensuring equal access for students with disabilities in compliance with state and federal law. DSP serves undergraduate, graduate and professional students; on-ground and on-line students; and students in all credit-granting courses and programs of study.

DSP strives to provide a welcoming and mutually respectful environment for our students, campus partners, our staff and the broader USC community. To that end, DSP welcomes

interactions with all its constituencies in person, or via telephone, email, or virtual platform, that are respectful and that serve to professionally meet the needs of our students and the campus community.

Also refer to: <https://dornsife.usc.edu/usc-policies/#disabilities>

Honors in Comparative Literature:

Are you a major in Comparative Literature who enjoys independent research and working closely with faculty? If so, you should consider honors in Comparative Literature. As an honors student, you will have the opportunity to develop a thesis project related to your research interests, in collaboration with a faculty advisor. Each student who successfully completes the project receives the designation “B.A. in Comparative Literature with Honors” on their transcript. For more information about program requirements, please see our webpage: <https://dornsife.usc.edu/colt/honors/> Please contact Natania Meeker (nmeeker@usc.edu) for more information.

Student Basic Needs Technology Assistance Program:

Attending classes online and completing coursework remotely requires access to technology that not all students have access to. If you need resources to successfully participate in this class, such as a laptop or internet hotspot, you may be eligible for the university’s equipment rental program. You can [submit an application here](#). The Student Basic Needs team will contact all applicants in early August and distribute equipment to eligible applicants prior to the start of the fall semester. <https://studentbasicneeds.usc.edu/resources/technology-assistance/>

Health and Wellness Resources:

Student Equity and Inclusion Programs: <https://seip.usc.edu/>

Mental Health Resources:

(213) 740-9355 (WELL)

<https://studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling/>

<https://mindful.usc.edu/>

<https://inpathy.com/>

<https://kortschakcenter.usc.edu/>

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention and Services / Sexual Assault and Survivor Support (provides 24/7 confidential support): <https://studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault/>

Academic Resources: <https://undergrad.usc.edu/services/resources/>

The Writing Center: <https://dornsife.usc.edu/writingcenter/>

The American Language Institute for students whose first language is one other than

English: <https://ali.usc.edu/>

The Language Center: <https://dornsife.usc.edu/languages/>

Plagiarism:

General principles of academic integrity include and incorporate the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one’s own academic work

from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles.

For more information on Plagiarism and Academic Misconduct visit Section 11 of the Student Conduct Code: <https://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b/> .

Title IX:

For students seeking assistance, please speak with the Title IX Office. The Title IX Office is responsible for conduct that falls within the below policy. For resources, to report prohibited conduct, or for other assistance, you can reach the Title IX Office by phone, email, mail, or in person.

Phone: **(213) 821-8298**

Email: titleix@usc.edu

Physical address:

Stonier Hall, Basement Suite

837 Downey Way, STO-B

Los Angeles, CA 90089

The Title IX Office will arrange for accessible meetings based on language or disability needs.

More information and resources are available at: <https://titleix.usc.edu/>

The Title IX Office is responsible for responding to reports of student harassment and student organization discrimination when the harassment or discrimination is based on a protected characteristic. The university prohibits discrimination or harassment based on the following protected characteristics: race, color, national origin, ancestry, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, physical disability, medical condition, mental disability, marital status, pregnancy, veteran status, genetic information, and any other characteristic which may be specified in applicable laws and governmental regulations. The university also prohibits sexual assault, non-consensual sexual contact, sexual misconduct, intimate partner violence, stalking, malicious dissuasion, retaliation, and violation of interim measures.

Retaliation is strictly prohibited and will be treated as a separate offense. Any concerns about retaliation should be brought to the attention of the Title IX office immediately.

Sexual, Interpersonal and Protected Class Misconduct:

University Policy (<https://policy.usc.edu/student-misconduct/>) states:

The University of Southern California believes that all members of the university community – students, faculty, staff, and visitors – should pursue their work and education in a safe environment, free from harassment based on protected characteristics, sexual misconduct, and interpersonal violence. The university is committed to stopping prohibited conduct, preventing its recurrence, addressing its effects, and eliminating hostile environments. Our goal is a safe and transparent university community where these behaviors are universally recognized as intolerable, where those who are harmed are provided support, and where a fair and impartial process is provided to all parties. The university's response to prohibited conduct is grounded in the fair application of policy and procedure.

The university prohibits discrimination or harassment based on the following protected characteristics: race, color, national origin, ancestry, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, physical disability, medical condition, mental disability, marital status, pregnancy, veteran status, genetic information, and any other characteristic which may be specified in applicable laws and governmental regulations. The university also prohibits sexual assault, non-consensual sexual contact, sexual misconduct, intimate partner violence, stalking, malicious dissuasion, retaliation, and violation of interim measures. Collectively, these behaviors are referred to as prohibited conduct.

The university is firmly committed to complying with all applicable laws and governmental regulations. This commitment applies to all educational programs and activities, including admissions, financial aid, and university programs. The university seeks compliance with all statutes prohibiting discrimination in education, including Title VI and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Act (as amended by the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013), the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendment Act of 2008. This good-faith effort to comply is made even when such laws and regulations conflict with each other. Further, in compliance with Section 504, the university provides reasonable accommodations for students and applicants with disabilities.

Also visit: USC Commitment to Change <https://change.usc.edu/> and the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/aboutocr.html> .

Other:

A more complete list of University policies and support services is available at <https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/campus-resources/> .