
ISLE OF INTELLECTUALS: CULTURAL & ENVIRONMENTAL THEORY FROM MARTINIQUE

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What happens when a small island becomes a global intellectual powerhouse?¹ How do landscapes—volcanic peaks, dense mangroves, and sprawling cities—shape the metaphors that thinkers use to reimagine history, identity, and resistance? This course explores the rich intellectual and literary traditions of Martinique, a Caribbean island that has generated some of the most influential anti-colonial, literary, and philosophical movements of the 20th and 21st centuries. Home to figures such as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Suzanne Césaire, Édouard Glissant, and Patrick Chamoiseau, Martinique has been a site of radical thought, artistic innovation, and cultural resistance.

Through poetry, essays, fiction, and film, we will trace the development of major intellectual movements—including Négritude, Antillanité, Créolité, and One-World Theory—and explore their impact on postcolonial theory, environmental justice, and Black intellectual traditions. We will also critically engage with Martinique as both a real and imagined space, examining how landscapes, cities, and nature function as powerful metaphors in the works of Caribbean writers.

Students will actively engage with texts through collaborative presentations, creative-analytical writing, and a dynamic Intellectual Salon debate, where they will adopt the personas of different thinkers to respond to contemporary global questions. While a reading knowledge of French may enhance the experience, all readings and media will be available in English translation.

By the end of the semester, students will not only understand the philosophical and literary traditions of Martinique, but also develop tools for critical reading, creative thinking, and global intellectual engagement.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This course is a GE Seminar in Humanistic Inquiry. By the end of this course, students will:

- Examine the intellectual and cultural traditions of Martinique and the broader French Caribbean, analyzing how these traditions shape identity, resistance, and artistic expression.
- Cultivate a critical appreciation for literature, philosophy, and film as tools of political and cultural inquiry, situating them within their historical, social, and geographical contexts.

¹ Gratitude to Vanessa Agard-Jones for inspiring this course and Lucien Taylor, who coined the phrase “Isle of Intellectuals.”

- Engage with and debate major intellectual movements, including Négritude, Antillanité, Créolité, and decolonial ecological thought, considering how they shape contemporary struggles for justice, autonomy, and environmental sustainability.
- Interpret complex literary and philosophical texts actively and analytically, strengthening skills in critical reading, argumentation, and creative synthesis.
- Develop the ability to evaluate ideas from multiple perspectives, particularly in relation to postcolonial, decolonial, and global intellectual traditions.
- Experiment with diverse forms of intellectual expression, including academic writing, creative translation, and collaborative discussion, to explore different ways of engaging with knowledge.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Aimé Césaire. 1939. *Journal of a homecoming = Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. Trans. Gregson Davis. Durham: Duke University Press (2017)

Aimé Césaire. 1955. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Monthly Review Press (2001)

Suzanne Césaire. 2012. *The Great Camouflage: Writing of Dissent*. Trans. Keith L. Walker. Wesleyan University Press.

Patrick Chamoiseau. 1992. *Texaco*. Knopf Doubleday (1998)

Malcolm Ferdinand. 2019. *A Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*. Polity Press.

ASSIGNMENTS

Participation & Reflection (15%)

At the end of each seminar, students will complete a brief reflection (a “minute paper”) answering two prompts:

1. What is one key insight you gained from today’s discussion?
2. What concept, reading, or question do you need more help with?

These reflections will help students track their intellectual growth and provide the instructor with insights into areas requiring further discussion. Periodically, students will review their reflections to identify connections between readings and themes, helping them prepare for major assignments.

Purpose: To encourage active engagement with course materials and develop reflective learning habits.

Collaborative Group Presentation (15%)

Working in groups, students will design and lead an interactive discussion on one of the following foundational texts:

- *Discourse on Colonialism* (A. Césaire)
- *In Praise of Creoleness* (Bernabé, Chamoiseau, Confiant)
- *Texaco* (Chamoiseau)
- *The Great Camouflage* (S. Césaire)

Each group must engage the class beyond a traditional lecture by incorporating elements such as: a creative learning activity (debates, concept mapping), multimedia components (artwork, short clips), discussion prompts that situate the text and/or connect it to contemporary issues.

Purpose: To develop leadership, analytical skills, and collaborative learning through interactive discussions on key course texts.

Translation & Transformation Assignment (10%)

For this assignment, students will choose a passage and reimagine it in a creative form, including but not limited to, a poem, short story, visual or multimedia work (painting, digital collage, video), dramatic monologue or performance piece.

In addition to their creative work, students will submit a 3–4-page reflection explaining:

- Why they chose this passage and medium
- What was gained or lost in translation
- How the new format reinforces or challenges the original ideas

Purpose: To explore the fluidity of language, ideas, and cultural expression by critically analyzing and creatively reinterpreting a passage in a new medium.

Due Date: Sunday, October 19th, 11:59PM

Landscapes of Thought: Environmental Metaphor Project (10% + 30% = 40%)

This two-part scaffolded assignment introduces students to close reading, metaphor analysis, and creative critical synthesis. Part I is a guided in-class group activity that develops the analytical tools needed for the final essay (Part II).

Part I – Metaphor in Motion (10%)

In-class Collaborative Analysis

Students will be assigned a natural element used in Martinican literature (e.g. the *morne*, volcano, mangrove, hurricane) and work in small groups to:

- Analyze how a Martinican author uses the element as a metaphor for cultural or political transformation
- Rewrite the original passage using a different natural metaphor
- Reflect on how the shift alters meaning and discuss with the class

Deliverable: Group discussion + a brief written summary (1-2 pages) submitted after class

Purpose: To practice close reading and metaphor deconstruction as a foundation for the final essay.

Date: In Class

Part II – Final Analytical-Creative Essay

Individual Essay, 8-10 pages

For this final essay, you will draw on the environmental metaphors we've explored throughout the semester to reflect on an experience from your own life. Beginning with a personal, social, or historical moment that matters to you, you will use a natural element (e.g. ocean, wildfire, mangrove, hurricane, desert, forest) as a metaphor to explore and analyze that experience. Your work will blend personal reflection and literary analysis, drawing on at least two thinkers from the course to deepen your interpretation of the metaphor.

This essay invites you to think with the land, the weather, and the ecologies around you—to draw on the metaphors in your own environments and use them, in conversation with Martinican intellectual traditions, to let the natural world illuminate how you understand your social world.

Format:

- **Begin with a personal, social, or historical experience.** This could be a memory, a transformation, a conflict, a family story, a political awakening, a moment of loss, joy, or displacement.
- **Choose a natural or environmental metaphor that is rooted in your surroundings.** This metaphor should arise from the place or landscape that shaped your experience—not just any natural image, but one that *emerges from your world*.
 - A student writing about isolation growing up in Alberta might use an ice storm as metaphor; a student reflecting on political protest in Los Angeles might use wildfire or drought; a student processing grief on the New Jersey shore might use tides or erosion.
 - The metaphor doesn't have to match a Martinican element, but it should resonate with how French Caribbean thinkers use the environment as a site of meaning-making.
- **Engage deeply with at least two course thinkers.** Use their texts and metaphors to analyze and enrich your interpretation. Ask: How do their ways of seeing the world help you think differently about your own experience and metaphor?
- **Blend personal writing and academic analysis.** You may write in the first person. You may include narrative, descriptive, or speculative elements—but your argument must be clear, thoughtful, and grounded in course materials.

Purpose: To apply literary interpretation skills in a hybrid mode that fosters both critical insight and creative engagement.

Due Date: December 10th, 11:59PM

Intellectual Salon: Living Thinkers Roundtable (20%)

For this assignment, students will take on the persona of an intellectual and participate in a curated roundtable debate on a major philosophical or political question.

Sample provocations include:

- What is the role of the writer in political struggle?
- How should intellectuals respond to climate change and environmental destruction?
- Can 'Creole' be expanded to think about different forms of mixture or fusion?

Each student will engage in dynamic debate, challenging or supporting others' views based on textual evidence.

Students will be evaluated on 1) How well they integrate the scholars' work into their arguments; 2) their ability to articulate, challenge, and refine ideas in real time; and 3) their engagement in the debate and ability to foster discussion.

The Intellectual Salon will conclude the semester and invite interested students and faculty to join the salon, leaving students with a memorable, interactive learning experience.

Purpose: To synthesize multiple thinkers' ideas and apply them to contemporary global issues in a dynamic discussion setting.

Date: Last Day of Class