## CHILDHOOD IN CARIBBEAN AND AFRICAN LITERATURE

### SELF-EVALUATION 2020

A major goal of this course is to help you become confident, independent readers of Caribbean and African Literature, capable of creating a context for understanding the work of a specific author, and of articulating, in writing and in conversation with others, what interests you about that author’s work. Please use the criteria below to help you monitor your progress towards this goal over the course of the semester, and to evaluate your performance at the end of the semester. Fifty percent of your final grade will be based on your self-evaluation.

#### **PART ONE** of the evaluation asks you to rate the consistency of your performance over the course of the semester. [Note: Part 1 was removed to reduce the length of the document.]

#### **PART TWO** gives you an opportunity to comment on specific readings and ideas; to evaluate your contributions to the course; and to describe how the course contributed to your intellectual development beyond the classroom, more broadly. **Answers in this section can help boost your grade as well as someone else’s.** This section should take about an hour to complete.

NAME: Eniola Ajao

YEAR: 2021

MAJOR: Computer Science, English

CLASS PRESENTATION: Eniola Ajao – Naipaul Presentation

TITLE OF FINAL ASSIGNMENT: The Politics of Childhood: Self-Formation in African Autobiography

### PART TWO

**Please answer all questions with examples and discussion. Remember that your answers may help your grade as well as that of one of your classmates, so take your time with this section.**

#### Write a short paragraph about what you found most provocative or enlightening in one assigned reading.

As a vegan, I am naturally inclined to see the common ground between vegetal, animal and human lives. However, Jamaica Kincaid’s essay “The Glasshouse” in *My Garden Book* gave me new ways to engage with the ideas that have been so formative in my personal identity. In “The Glasshouse” Kincaid describes a transplanted tree that she and her father frequently sat under: “It was in the shade of the distorted branches of the rubber tree (though this distortion is perfectly natural to the rubber tree) in the botanical garden of St. John’s, Antigua, a garden that was the creation of the most ambivalent of people, that I came to know important things,  though I came to understand them only long after” (147). Under this tree, her father speaks to her about his tragic childhood, and the effects “shameful qualities of Imperialism and unjustified aggression” had on his family. Under this tree, Kincaid has an epiphany that leads her to witness the objectification of her father: “It is possible that, in a way, a very human way, my father, when sitting under a rubber tree in the botanical garden, was in the presence, the atmosphere, the shrine of Possession, and that he himself was an object, a mere thing within it” (148). Her experience under this tree helped Kincaid (and me) recognize how intertwined the fates and histories of multiple species are. The transplanted rubber tree represents Kincaid’s father’s own dislocations and underscores the legacies of different moments of forced migrations. This enlightening idea has helped me to be more conscious of the shared cultural histories of humans and vegetation. In my own continued movements across the world, I continue to think about how my personal story might be mirrored by the vegetal interactions.

#### Identify one author, country, theme, or literary device and describe how you engaged with the ideas to which your exploration exposed you in your weekly papers.

Although I was deeply skeptical of the inclusion of Coetzee’s *Boyhood* in our syllabus, I am happy to report that the book has emerged as a rich site of literary engagement for me, so much so that I wrote about it in my final essay. I enjoyed engaging with Coetzee’s curious use of the third person in the book and grappling with the limits of self-expression. Here is an excerpt from my reflection on Coetzee from that week: “The ability to shift from the first-person singular to the first-person plural when talking about my Nigerian identity – to move from “I” to “we” or “us” is a luxury I have taken for granted. I know this now after observing Coetzee’s awkward dance as depicted in *Boyhood* with trying to discover and then invent a South African sense of self.” Thinking about Coetzee’s depiction of the profound racial, cultural, and linguistic divisions between, and also within, groups as a result of South Africa’s colonial and apartheid history required me to think about the complex divisions present in the United States, a country that I have lived in now for many years, but whose politics I have avoided engaging with under a guise of lack of citizenship. The very issue that I took with Coetzee – his combination of the omniscience of an outsider with the subjectivity of a person experiencing first-hand—is something that I am guilty of myself! As he moves between identification and rejection (of his mother, country, self) I saw the ways in which I myself toe the line in my daily life.

#### Describe how you (or you and your group) prepared for your presentation and what you think the class learned from your presentation.

As the only member in my group, I prepared for my presentation alone. This involved reading *Miguel Street* twice-- once for a general understanding of the narrative and structure and the second time reading for literary devices, themes, implications and aesthetic properties. My presentation also required a large amount of outside research, partially because of Naipaul’s rich and varied body of work and partially because of the ways the fictionalized book reflects the author’s own life. As such my background information and presentation included quotes from Naipaul’s other texts, and numerous examples of popular critiques of Naipaul’s work. I looked to Naipaul’s personal life for insights and watched interviews that he had conducted. Finally, I performed research into Trinidad and Tobago, to provide greater context for the classroom about what real life street the fictional “Miguel Street” might be based on. My class presentation began with a simple question, “Who found *Miguel Street* funny?” After a majority of the class raised their hands, I then proceeded to ask, “Were you laughing at the characters or with them?” I believe that this framing helped the class to think about Naipaul’s use of humor in a more nuanced way by relating it to their personal experience of the novel. The question also elicited a variety of responses. Some of my peers were unsure as to whether they were indeed laughing at the characters in the book or with them and wrestled with the portrayals of the characters in the book. While I do not believe that the class came to a conclusion about the ethics of Naipaul’s decision to portray Trinidadians as people with no “social depth and solidity and rootedness,” I think my presentation helped the class understand Naipaul’s creative intentions a little better.

#### Identify at least two group presentations you consider most memorable and describe what you learned from them.

* The two presentations I consider to be most memorable are the presentation on Liking’s *Love Across a Hundred Lives* by T. and V. [names redacted for anonimity] and the presentation on Kincaid’s *Annie John* by S. and L. In T. and V.’s presentation, I appreciated the technique of breaking down the complicated relationships described in the book by drawing them out and making those connections physically on the board. Although it is a technique that I was familiar with prior to their presentation, I was impressed with their application of it to a text like Liking’s. The presentation refamiliarized me with an important mode of textual engagement that I had previously thought too juvenile for a college student to use. It opened up the text to me and made clear relationships between characters that seem obvious in hindsight. I also loved their engagement with the oral history of African literature, as that is not something that we discussed a lot in the class. In S. and L.’s presentation, wrestling with a fractured portrayal of a relationship between a mother and child was intriguing, but uncomfortable at times. From S. and L., I learned appropriate ways to dive headfirst into discomfort when analyzing a text for/with a class. Their engagement with ideas like the intimacy of the ritualized baths that Annie and her mother took together was helpful in my understanding of the book. For example, conceptualizing the bath as a metaphor for the womb pushed me to think deeper about Annie’s desire to prove that she is a separate person from her mother.

#### Identify one comment you made during class that you think your classmates found useful and describe the discussion it generated within or outside of the classroom.

* I believe that my classmates resonated strongly with my comments on *Boyhood*. Although I have since changed my opinion, I commented during a class discussion that I was uneasy with Coetzee’s lack of engagement with the serious issues facing the country at the time of his childhood. I pointed to a specific passage in which a coloured man visits their home and is offered a cup of tea, After the man leaves the home, his mother must decide whether to throw the cup away. She settles on cleaning it with bleach instead. I expressed frustration and disbelief at Coetzee’s ability to gloss over such a significant episode. This led to a discussion about the responsibility of a writer to address such issues while remaining honest and true to their particular experiences. It also led to a discussion about the racial politics of South Africa at the time, which provided much needed context for the class’ understanding of the book.

#### Describe at least two comments your classmates made that helped you to understand the material or to take a concept further.

* C.’s personal reflection in response to *Annie John* was not only deeply moving, but also helped me to ground the issues discussed in the book in real life. As I found myself unable to relate to Annie’s attitude towards her mother, it was C.’s retelling of the first time she spoke back to her mother that helped me to separate all the details of Annie’s relationship with her mother from the underlying frustrations. C.’s response challenged me to think more about my own relationship with my mother and the ways that I was in fact able to relate to Annie.
* Another memorable comment that comes to mind is one from very early on in the semester: J.’s recollection of his process imitating Kincaid’s “Girl.” I recall J. detailing the revisions he made in the second draft of his imitation and explaining his choices in a way that was honest, reflective, and unself-conscious. I remember in particular that he titled his imitation piece, “Man” instead of “Boy” like I had expected him to. J. wrestled with this choice in real time in front of the class and admitted that he had not thought much about it, but instead instantly knew that he would title his piece “Man.” This small, seemingly insignificant choice has remained with me throughout the semester. On one level, it was a moment of enlightenment that revealed the paradoxical nature of girlhood—girls are expected to retain their adolescence while possessing an unrealistic amount of maturity. For boys, expectations of masculinity shorten the transition from boyhood to manhood so that it happens at the blink of an eye. On another level, J.’s taught me important lessons about sharing my work with others.

#### Describe one memorable conversation you had with someone who was not a member of this class about the ideas to which this course exposed you.

* I am recalling a conversation I had with my mother concerning the subjectivity of memory as we had very different accounts of a particular event that happened in my childhood. Our contrasting historical accounts led to a discussion of some of the works of childhood literature that we’ve talked about in the class. Additionally, we discussed the meaning of truth, a conversation reminiscent of the class conversion on the validity of Camara Laye’s *The Dark Child.* Although my mother and I never came to an agreement on the details of that childhood event, we enjoyed a rich discussion on the differences between the romanticized experience of a child and the alienated perspective of the adult.

#### Describe two insights about Caribbean and/or African literature that you will take away from this course.

* The first insight that I am taking away from this course is an insight about Caribbean literature. As many of the texts under examination in the class revealed to me for the first time the substantial differences (racial, linguistic, colonial) that are present in the Caribbean, I wondered what in particular makes a work of literature “Caribbean.” Although this same question can be asked about African literature, I have always felt able to recognize works of African literature by a distinct sense of “African identity,” not limited to the writer's ideological, geographic, or ethnic orientations. I have come to the conclusion that this uniqueness of racial backgrounds, geographical boundaries, and language communities is an essential part of a unified sense of “Caribbeanness.”
* The second is an insight about African literature. Reading Liking’s *Love Across a Hundred Lives* was a great reminder of the history of African literature, particularly its indigenous oral and literary past. I am taking away from this course a new understanding of African literature, one that does not view African literature as a relatively new invention, or as originating only through colonial influence and trauma.

#### How did the COVID-19 crisis affect what you will take away from this course?

* There are moments where I forget that I am in the midst of a global pandemic—I park myself in front of the television with a bowl of popcorn and click mindlessly through the options on Netflix. Other times I am crippled by anxiety and uncertainty, unable to get out of bed. While I no longer this stage in my life a part of my childhood, I do wonder about how I would write about this moment in time if I were ever to write an autobiography or a memoir. The course has exposed me to many different accounts of childhood, some constructed around tragedy and frustration, others deeply nostalgic and wistful. It has shown me the plurality of experiences in the African and Caribbean diaspora, and how grateful I am to have these experiences available for my consumption. The course, combined with the current COVID-19 crisis are the reasons why I have begun to journal again, to write down every feeling and thought, the mundane and the extraordinary. I am taking away from this course a new zeal for writing and recording my history.