

Cultures of Exile—Memory, Art, and Ideology in Moder[ist] Diasporas

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"Literatures of Exile" is conceived as a multi-disciplinary two-semester study of "others" far from home. The first semester--"Black Paris"--focuses on black artists, musicians and writers in Paris--an important diasporic site--during the interwar [1925 to 1940] and post World War II eras [1945 until 1975].

"Black Paris" is a propaedeutic case-study whose implications extend beyond its Paris setting and beyond its black subjects. Our reading of the interactions of representative exiles--Anglophone and Francophone--from the United States, Africa, and the Caribbean at this modern[ist] cultural site establishes [a family of] critical languages and an historical-cultural frame of reference that enable exciting comparative work second semester.

The study--given its historical-cultural framing [engaging alternative readings of modernism and the modern world] and its interrogation of the "languages" in which the West understands itself and [its designated] "others"--offers first an *optic* for reviewing vexed issues in cultural studies and in the human sciences, and second a *method* for articulating [that is organizing] those issues in such a way that they become susceptible of comparative critical investigation.

Among the intersecting issues in cultural studies and the human sciences that the seminar explicitly addresses are those of "language" [at once enabling and disciplining communication]; "agency" [do we speak languages or do languages/cultures speak us? whose/what languages are at our disposal?]; "identity" and cultural syncretism or hybridity [the intersection of the personal-creative and the ethnic-cultural, in a world of cross-border transactions]; "performance" theory [as a way of reimagining conditions under which dramatic improvisation occurs and self-authorship--at the margins?--may be possible]; political-economic and socio-linguistic processes of "othering" and "abjecting," and the "hidden transcripts" and strategies that might resist them; the paradoxes/ironies inherent in the opposition of universalist [spurious? imperialist? scientific?] rationalisms versus ethnic/racial/romantic essentialisms as blueprints for colonialist or nationalist projects and for their respective identity discourses; the power-knowledge implications of privileged [unmarked] subject positions in "reading" the world or--otherwise put--who monopolizes the Western cultural "imaginary" and what is the yield/cost for insiders/outsideers? etc., etc.

After sharpening/exploiting the *optic* and rehearsing/elaborating the *method* during the first semester, we will draw on the disciplinary expertise and craft lore of seminar participants to fashion a case-study [or two?] of another diasporic crossroads community and/or the similarly contextualized "literatures" of an alternative designated "other."

Our brainstorming should yield a focused cultural problem[atic] and a hypothesis for comparative investigation--to wit: that [i] the historical and material conditions of black "othering" and [ii] the binary discursive and "Orientalizing" processes of black "othering" are syntactically parallel and paradigmatic.

A collateral hypothesis is that improvising black identities in word and deed--where "black" refers not to a preconstituted identity or essence of the sort critiqued in the first semester, but to an open set of dramatic, socially constructed, historically contingent, [potentially] self-interpreting practices--suggests the "conditions of possibility" of true black [ergo true human] subjectivity.