

LT204: CONTEMPORARY CURRENTS IN EAST AFRICAN LITERATURE

Seminar Leader: Boneace Chagara, PhD.

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Office Hours: by appointment

Course Description

The eastern part of sub-Saharan Africa—spanning East Africa (Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania) and the Horn of Africa (Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea and Ethiopia)—is a vibrant literary landscape. This seminar explores the richness and complexity of contemporary Eastern African literatures through fiction, poetry, narrative nonfiction and digital texts of the 21st Century. The seminar will be structured thematically and historically, encouraging students to trace aesthetic, formal, as well as political continuities and ruptures in Eastern African writing over the past two decades. We will start our inquiry by mapping the shifting terrain of contemporary Eastern African writing, highlighting its historical and geographical contexts. We will then explore how this writing addresses layered textures of everyday life amid shifting political, cultural, and ecological landscapes. We will address themes like the afterlives of empire, urbanization, migration, diasporic subjectivity, politics of gender and sexuality, among others. Drawing on African philosophical thought and postcolonial literary theory, our approach will emphasize close reading and contextual analysis while paying close attention to form, language, and aesthetics. Students will critically reflect on literature's power to unsettle dominant narratives and imagine alternative lived realities. We shall engage with exemplary texts from Eastern African authors—including Nuruddin Farah and Abdourahman Waberi (Somalia/Djibouti), Scholastique Mukasonga (Rwanda), Maaza Mengiste (Ethiopia), Jennifer Nansubuga and Doreen Baingana (Uganda), Mukoma wa Ngugi, Makena Onjerika, Yvonne Adhiambo and Billy Kahora (Kenya), Haji Gora Haji, Adam Shafi and Abdulrazak Gurnah (Tanzania/Zanzibar)—as well as selections from *Kwani?*, *Jalada Africa*, and *Bahati Books*. Supplemental readings from critical theorists and scholars like Achille Mbembe, Walter D. Mignolo and Paul Gilroy will aid our textual and contextual readings.

Requirements

This is a discussion-driven seminar; students are expected to:

- Attend all classes and arrive on time. Absences/lateness require prior approval.
- Complete weekly readings and critical reflection before class.
- Participate meaningfully in discussion by offering informed, respectful contributions.
- Engage with peers, ask questions, and bring examples or insights from the readings.
- Acquire own copies of relevant literary texts whenever possible. Limited excerpts of supplementary readings and other media will be circulated weekly for classroom use.
- Submit mid- and end of semester assignments on time, in accordance with stipulated guidelines and timeframes.

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Accommodations

Bard College Berlin is committed to inclusion and providing equal access to all students; we uphold and maintain all aspects of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 3 of the German Disability Equality Act of April 27, 2002 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1468). If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, Atticus Kleen, (accommodations@berlin.bard.edu) to request an official accommodation.

Requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible to ensure adequate time for coordination and planning. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and may require advance notice to implement.

If you have already been approved for accommodations with the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, please arrange to meet with me outside of class so that we can develop an implementation plan.

Students may face extenuating circumstances related to various personal or external factors, which impact their academic performance. While these circumstances often do not fall within the legal framework of Disability Accommodations, Bard College Berlin is committed to supporting students experiencing such circumstances. A student needing a short extension or a replacement assignment because of an extenuating circumstance is encouraged to make arrangements directly with instructors if possible. If further support is needed, please visit the Bard College Berlin Accessibility page. Questions about this process can be directed to James Harker (j.harker@berlin.bard.edu) or Maria Anderson-Long (m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu).

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation.

Beyond that, students must provide proof of subsequent excused absences or risk losing 5 points of the participation grade for further unexcused absences. Remote participation in classes is NOT possible.

Bard College Berlin may not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Assessment

1. Preparation & Active Participation

2. Mid-semester Essay (1,500–2,000 words)

Write a critical analytical essay focusing on one or two texts from the first half of the semester (Week 1-7).

Due Date: Week 8, Friday 20th March 2026 at 11:59 PM CET.

Final Submission: via **Google Classroom**

Preparatory Work:

- **Topic and outline presentation** required by Week 4, Friday 20th Feb, 2026.
- **Draft submission** via **Google Classroom** by Week 6, Monday 2nd Feb, 2026.
- **Consultation** with **writing tutors**/use of the **Learning Commons**.
- One-on-one **feedback & peer-review** sessions (in class).

Stipulations:

- Draft submission and writing consultation are required for full credit
- Creative, digital, or alternative projects require prior approval
- Final papers must follow **MLA** or **Chicago citation style**
- Late submissions require prior approval.

3. End-of-Semester Essay (3,000–3,500 words (or equivalent for creative writing/archival research assignment)

Write a research essay focusing on one or two texts from the second half of the semester (week 8-14) OR an approved creative writing/ alternative research project (e.g., archival research assignment).

Due Date: Week 14, Mon 27th April 2026 at 11:59 PM CET.

Final Submission: via **Google Classroom**

Preparatory Work:

- **Topic & Outline presentation** (in class) by Week 9, Friday 27th March, 2026.
- **Draft submission** via **Google Classroom** by Week 12, Mon 13th April, 2026.
- **Consultation** with **writing tutors**/use of the **Learning Commons**.
- One-on-one **feedback & peer-review** sessions (in class).

Stipulations:

- Draft submission and writing consultation are **required** for full credit
- Creative, digital, or alternative projects require prior approval
- Final papers must follow **MLA** or **Chicago citation style**
- Late submissions require prior approval

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed upon by both parties. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students will receive feedback for their course work during and at the end of the semester. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

Preparation & Active Participation- 30%
Mid-semester Essay- 40%
End of Semester Essay- 60%

Schedule

Week 1 — Introduction: Mapping the Eastern African Literary Terrain

- Overview of Contemporary Eastern African Literatures
- Literary infrastructures: festivals, collectives, digital platforms
- Postcolonial legacies, regional literatures, publishing ecologies

Required Text(s):

- Ogude et al, *Rethinking Eastern African Literary and Intellectual Landscapes*.
- Alex Nelungo Wanjala, "Introduction: Commemorating the 50th anniversary of East African literature as an academic discipline"

Supplementary Reading(s):

- Odhiambo & Siundu, "Journeying into Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies".
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance*.
- Lindsey Green-Simms, "On New African Writing"

Week 2— Literary Histories: From Post-Independence to 21st-Century Currents

- Continuities and ruptures from Ngugi, Aidoo, Farah
- Publishing histories, censorship, diaspora circulation

Required Text(s):

- Chris Wanjala, "The Growth of a Literary Tradition in East Africa"
- Musila & Ligaga, "East African Interventions in African Literary and Cultural Studies".

Supplementary Reading(s):

- Gikandi & Mwangi, *The Columbia Guide to East African Literature in English Since 1945*.
- Billy Kahora, "Reflections on the Post-2000 Sub-Saharan Literary Renaissance".
- Binyavanga Wainaina, "How to Write About Africa".

Week 3— Afterlives of Empire: Memory, Violence & Postcolonial States

- State violence, war memory, nation-building narratives

Required Text:

- Scholastique Mukasonga, *The Barefoot Woman*.

Supplementary Reading(s):

- Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (excerpts)
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Something Torn and New* (excerpts)

Week 4— Literature as Resistance: Ethics, Agency & Alternative Worlds

- Literature as critique, refusal, and ethical imagination
- Midsemester Essay topic and outline presentation

Required Text:

- Nuruddin Farah, selections from *Hiding in Plain Sight*.

Supplementary Reading(s):

- Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (excerpts)
- Nancy N., Chen, "Speaking Nearby:" A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha'

Week 5— Indian Ocean Imaginaries: Afro-Arab, Swahili & Archipelagic Worlds

- Coastal and island literatures
- Histories of oceanic connection, slavery, trade, mysticism

Required Text(s):

- Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Admiring Silence*
- Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, *Dust* (Part I)

Supplementary Reading:

- Prita Meier, "Objects on the Edge: Swahili Coast Logics of Display"

Week 6— Migration, Diaspora, and Transnational Belonging

- Migration aesthetics
- Exile, displacement, and forms of home-making
- Mid-semester essay draft submission via Google Classroom due

Required Text(s):

- Abdulrazak Gurnah, *By the Sea/ Pilgrims Way*
- Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, *Manchester Happened* (selections).

Supplementary Reading(s):

- Knott & McLoughlin, *Diasporas: Concepts, intersections, identities*.
- Ato Quayson, "Postcolonialism & the Diasporic Imaginary"

Week 7 — The Horn of Africa: Conflict, Language & Narrative Innovation

- Multilingual writing (Amharic, Tigrinya, Oromo, Somali)
- War, displacement, and narrative fractures

Required Text:

- Maaza Mengiste, *The Shadow King*

Supplementary Reading(s):

- Laleh Khalili, "Narratives of War"
- Gabriella Ghermandi, interviews on memory & authorship

Week 8— Language, Form, and Subversion

- Crime fiction as political critique, hybridity, violence.
- Mid-semester essay final submission via Google Classroom due

Required text(s): Mukoma wa Ngugi, *Black Star Nairobi*.

Supplementary Reading: Select critical essays on genre and resistance.

Week 9— Experimental Forms & Aesthetic Innovation

- Non-linear narratives, hybrid genres
- End-of-semester essay topic & outline presentation (in class) due

Required Text:

- Abdourahman Waberi, *Transit; In the United States of Africa*

Supplementary Reading(s):

- Walter D. Mignolo, "Decolonial Aesthetics"
- Ogunyemi et al, *Rethinking Eastern African Literary and Intellectual Landscapes*.
- Selections from *Jalada Africa, Kwani?, Down River Road*

Week 10 — Spring Break (No Meeting on Fri 3rd Apr, 2026)

Week 11 — Everyday Life as Method: Urban, Rural, Liminal Spaces

- Representations of urban precarity and rural transitions
- Everyday aesthetics & chronopolitics

Required Text:

- Makena Onjerika, "Fanta Blackcurrant"

Supplementary Reading(s):

- Achille Mbembe, "The Aesthetics of Vulgarities"
- Billy Kahora, *The True Story of David Munyakei* (excerpts)

Week 12 — Gender, Sexuality & Embodied Narratives

- Representations of women, queer subjectivity, gendered violence
- Feminist and queer African epistemologies
- End-of-semester essay draft submission (via Google Classroom) due

Required Text(s):

- Doreen Baingana, *Tropical Fish*
- Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, *Manchester Happened* (selections); *The First Woman*

Supplementary Reading(s) & Screening:

- Sylvia Tamale, *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism*
- Nanjala Nyabola, "African Feminisms as Method"
- Jim Chuchu et al, *Stories of Our Lives*

Week 13 — Ecological Imaginaries & Climate Narratives

- Environmental change, resource conflict, slow violence
- Pastoralism, land politics, ecological futures

Required Text:

- Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, *Dust* (excerpts)

Supplementary Reading(s):

- Rob Nixon, "Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor"
- Somali and Ethiopian eco-poetry selections

Week 14 — Labour Day (No Meeting on Fri 1st May, 2026)

- End-of-semester essay final submission (via Google Classroom) due.

Week 15 — Youth Culture, Digital Literatures & Spoken Word

- Digital storytelling, YouTube poetry, blogs, literary collectives

Required Text:

- Nanjala Nyabola, *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics* (chapter)

Supplementary Reading(s):

- *Kwani?*, *Jalada*, *Brittle Paper*, *Bahati Books* (selections)
- Jalada Translations issue (Ngugi's story multilingual translation)
- Selected spoken-word videos (Caroline M. Acen (Afroetry), Raya Wambui)

Week 16 — Completion (Critical reflection & synthesis)