

On the Congo

Contact information

Instructor	Matthew Wilkens
Course	English 13186: University Seminar
Section	08: On the Congo
Meetings	TR 3:30–4:45
Location	334 DeBartolo
Office hours	320 Decio; WF 10:00–11:00 and by appointment. Reserve office hour slots at bit.ly/wilkens_appointments .
E-mail	mwilkens@nd.edu
Phone	574.631.2571

Synopsis

A first-year seminar covering major authors, genres, and problems in twentieth-century literature and theory, organized around historical and fictional treatments of the Congo.

Description

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is the most famous English novel about the Congo and one of the best-known accounts of colonialism from the colonizers' perspective. But the river and the appalling legacy of colonialism, misrule, and war in the region have since inspired literary responses from those both inside and outside Africa. This course will examine a selection of these texts in order to understand better some of the major movements, forms, and problems of twentieth-century literature.

We will begin with an overview of the Congo's history from the early colonial period through the present day. The historical materials we examine will provide a background against which to read the literary texts that are the primary focus of the course, but we will also use them to discuss the relationship between history and narrative, both written and visual. We will then read Conrad's novel, along with several critiques and reinterpretations of it, before turning to Emmanuel Dongala and to postcolonial theory proper. The remainder of the semester will be devoted to a number of texts—European, African, and American—the precise national origins of which are sometimes difficult to trace. In addition to continuing our investigation of colonialism and historical writing, we will examine the problem of translation and the genres of travel writing and memoir, each of which is raised directly in one or more of our sources.

Objectives

This course has three primary objectives, which can be arranged in order of increasing generality. First, it aims to provide a specific body of knowledge about modern world literature and its associated problems and theorizations. Students who complete this course will be prepared to undertake more advanced work in these areas and to begin making their own contributions to them. Second, it provides a basis for further work in the literary humanities, cultural studies, and social sciences generally. It introduces students to meth-

ods and critical vocabularies employed in these fields and familiarizes them with the resources commonly used in conducting literary and social-scientific research. Third, it refines students’ ability to perform critical and metacritical analyses, skills that are broadly applicable to their work both within and outside the academy. The course also explicitly emphasizes writing skills and incorporates writing instruction into regular class discussion.

Written work and grading

This is a writing-intensive first-year seminar. Two papers of pages of 7–8 pages each will be required, one due before fall break and the other taking the place of a final exam. Both papers will be workshopped with your peers, submitted to me as drafts, and revised for re-submission and grading. In addition, five one- to two-page response papers will be required over the course of the semester. Overall grades will be based on the long papers (30% and 40%, respectively), response papers (20% in sum), and class participation (10%). *You must satisfactorily complete all assignments to pass the course.*

Texts and readings

- Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough. 4th ed. (New York: Norton, 2006).
- Emmanuel Dongala, *The Fire of Origins* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 2001).
- Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost* (New York: Mariner, 1999). (**Sakai, selections**)
- Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1999).
- V.S. Naipaul, *A Bend in the River* (New York: Vintage, 1989).
- Sony Labou Tansi, *The Antipeople*. Trans J.A. Underwood. (London: Marion Boyars, 1987). (**Sakai**)
- Jeffrey Tayler, *Facing the Congo* (New York: Random House, 2000).

In addition to the historical and critical material collected in the Norton edition of *Heart of Darkness*, selected media and secondary materials will be available on Sakai.

Policy statements

Attendance

Two absences (one week of meetings), no questions asked. Additional absences will lower your grade. **No absences allowed on workshop days.**

Late work

Late work is generally not accepted. If you find yourself in exceptional circumstances, talk to me well in advance of the deadline and we may be able to find an accommodation.

Collaboration and plagiarism

Talking to other students—especially those in the course—about your ideas is a good thing. Taking other people’s words or ideas without attribution is plagiarism and will result in honor-code-related unpleasantness. When in doubt, cite. And feel free to ask me about

specific cases or problems and about the mechanics of research documentation. For references and guidelines, see the library’s [plagiarism](#) and [documentation](#) sites and the university’s [academic code of honor](#).

Disabilities

Students with documented disabilities who need accommodations or have questions should speak with me directly and contact the [Office of Disability Services](#).

Email

Email is a useful tool, but it is not (generally) secure. I will discuss grades and other confidential information over email only if you use encryption software (typically PGP/GPG).

Schedule

NB. All dates and assignments subject to change.

WEEK 1 (8/27)	Welcome and introduction. Hochschild.
WEEK 2 (9/3)	Hochschild, Braudel
WEEK 3 (9/10)	Conrad
WEEK 4 (9/17)	Conrad
WEEK 5 (9/24)	Dongala
WEEK 6 (10/1)	Dongala
WEEK 7 (10/8)	Kingsolver. Paper I draft due 10/8.
WEEK 8 (10/15)	Kingsolver. Workshop 10/15. Paper I due 10/17.
WEEK 9 (10/22)	Fall break, no class meetings.
WEEK 10 (10/29)	Kingsolver, Naipaul
WEEK 11 (11/5)	Naipaul
WEEK 12 (11/12)	Naipaul, Tansi
WEEK 13 (11/19)	Tansi
WEEK 14 (11/26)	Tansi. Thanksgiving, no class meeting 11/28.
WEEK 15 (12/3)	Taylor. Paper II draft due 12/3.
WEEK 16 (12/10)	Taylor. Conclusions. Workshop 12/12.
FINALS WEEK	Final paper and portfolio due in lieu of exam (12/17 by 12:30 pm)