

Literary Oceans, Economic Currents

(ENGL 2000: Texts & Contexts)



Romare Bearden, "Home to Ithaca" (1979)

This course explores how evolving trans-oceanic economic relationships have prompted new human interrelationships with the ocean, and with each other, and the ways that literature has represented these developments. Topics of consideration include the economics and social meaning of fishing and other forms of natural extraction, piracy, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and nuclear testing in the Pacific. Course texts range from ca. 900 AD to today, and cover a range of genres, including prose, poetry, and music. As a class we will address such diverse issues as race, labor, and questions of international boundaries and control of ocean spaces and resources.

This course will also develop your skills of literary interpretation. We will strengthen your techniques of close reading and observation, and your ability to construct and support an argument constructed out of your own insights about the texts. We will also discuss these texts in class, providing you the opportunity to put into your words your interests and questions about the texts, and to consider the insights of your peers.

READING LIST

The Dangerous Ocean

Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Ocean” (1852) and Derek Walcott, “The Sea is History” (1979)

We begin with a consideration of similarities and differences between Hawthorne’s and Walcott’s depictions of the ocean as an ambiguous archive, paying particular attention to what historical and social differences might motivate these differing depictions, and the diverse understandings both present of the ocean.

“The Seafarer” (ca. 900 CE)

After reading and discussing Michael Burch’s translation of this essential Anglo-Saxon text, we will discuss how danger, difficulty, and ambiguity flow throughout “The Seafarer.” We will then consider additional translations by Ezra Pound and Burton Raffel, with an eye toward how these various interpretations change our understanding of the text, and how the ocean is presented in each. Present in these questions of translation, and in the text itself, are issues of ambiguity and the inherent challenges of depicting the ocean.

Whose Ocean is It?

Captain Charles Johnson (Daniel Defoe), *A General History of the Pyrates* (1724, excerpted) and Marcus Rediker *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* (1987, excerpted)

A General History of the Pyrates, usually ascribed to Defoe, is perhaps the most popular and influential work on pirates ever. We will pair selected vignettes from this text with Rediker’s evocative descriptions of pirates’ equitable social structure. Particular attention will be paid to the ways that Caribbean piracy was fueled by, and in some ways challenged, Europe’s violent extraction of wealth from North and South America.

Rule, Britannia! (1740, poem by James Thomson, music by Thomas Arne)

We will read and listen to this popular poem, and even more popular song, as an introduction to the evolving concepts of *Mare Nostrum* and *Mare Liberum*, looking back to Roman control over the Mediterranean Ocean, then to Dutch and Portuguese naval and literary battles in the early 1600s, before turning to Britain’s 1740 declaration of their god-given right to control the ocean. We will also discuss America’s post WWII massive territorial expansion in the Pacific, and China’s current attempts to control the South China Sea.

The Middle Passage and Beyond

Oludah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Oludah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789)

Equiano's autobiography provides a fascinating look into the Middle Passage, the American slave trade, Equiano's development into a skilled sailor, and early British Arctic explorations. Functioning as a counterpoint to the preceding discussions of who controls the ocean, this text exemplifies first-hand the diverse experiences of people actually on the ocean, including as slaves and as sailors.

M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (2008)

This challenging long poem explores the death by drowning of 150 enslaved Africans in November, 1781. Running out of water, the ship's captain decided that since death by drowning would be covered by insurance, but death by dehydration would not, then the ship owners would be recompensed for the enslaved African's deaths. This led to an insurance court case that functions as *Zong!*'s source text. Grappling with the intersection of economics, slavery, and history, *Zong!* is an fascinating exploration into how the past remains contemporaneous with the moment.

Kara Walker, *After the Deluge* (2007)

A contemporary multi-media artist, Walker has gathered here a collection of historical paintings and drawings, and original works of her own creation, that tackle slavery, race, and gender in the United States. Inspired by New Orleans's struggles in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Walker constructs a graphic representation of the racial oppression faced by African Americans, both historically and today.

Sailors Adrift at Sea

Edgar Allen Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838)

Poe's odd nautical tale draws involves shipwrecks, racial inversions, mutinies, and cannibalism. Poe was seeking to emulate the popularity of sailors' narratives while creating this text, but what we encounter is far stranger. Simultaneously supporting and undermining Western narratives of dominating the sea, this text increasingly challenges the possibility of any conclusive understanding of the sailor and their relationship with the sea.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor* (1970, trans. 1986)

Marquez's first published book is a nonfiction account of a sailor who is washed overboard while sailing from Mobile, Alabama to Colombia. Surviving for ten days without food or water, this text is not only an exciting tale of survival at sea, it is also an insightful look into the economic differences between North and South America, and the ways such differences lead to situations that put peoples' lives at risk.

Modern Migrations

Edwidge Danticat, "Children of the Sea" (1995)

Danticat's short story concerns a Haitian revolutionary in exile on a boat sailing for Miami. Present in this story are issues of Caribbean migration, the political and economic differences between Haiti and the United States, and the dangers of migration. As this story shows, important interconnections remain between the historic Middle Passage and the dangers migrants face today.

Aracelis Girmay, *The Black Maria* (2016)

This work considers modern migration across the Mediterranean, what motivations prompt such migrations, and the substantial dangers migrants face. Focusing in particular on the experiences of Eritrean migrants, the text presents a consideration of how the labors, and continual deaths, of migrants in Mediterranean haunt contemporary Europe.

Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (2008)

Set in early 1800s India, this novel follows various characters who gather on the former slave ship *Ibis* as it sails from Calcutta to Mauritius. Destined to work as indentured servants, these characters face uncertain futures, even as the text reveals the effects of colonialism and what economic and social difficulties could motivate them to leave home.