

# *...my language is my country*

Yen Vu

## Upper-level Undergraduate/Graduate Seminar

This gateway course ventures into the limitations, functions, and capacities of language through a postcolonial and comparative lens. Taking the title as a productive heuristic and a point of departure, we will explore the validity and veracity of considering one's language as an ontological source of origin through a selection of twentieth century literary and critical works. The working definition of language is not only a category of communication but also of exploration. We will ask fundamental questions, such as what is the relationship between language and nation or language and identity, but also allow ourselves to imagine the misgivings and suspicions that lie within language. That is, rather than assume that meanings and interpretations are felicitous givens inherent in a language, we will enter into an ambivalent realm in which language can be menacing and violent, productive and restorative, created and dissimulated. Students will take away from this course the tools and perspectives to question the language(s) we speak, write, interpret, choose and exclude.

### Goals & Expectations

The goal of this course is to help you build a repertoire of critical tools to discuss and analyze language in the wide context of literary studies. You will be exposed to a number of postcolonial approaches to engage with language, but these are not by any means exhaustive. The course will also allow you to hone academic writing skills with practice writing books reviews and conference papers.

As a seminar, class sessions are dependent upon preparation, careful reading, and engaged participation. You are highly encouraged to come to class with questions and discussion points.

### Principle Texts

Aimé Césaire, *The Tragedy of King Christophe* (1963)  
Therese Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictée* (1982)  
Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other: or the Prosthesis of Origin* (1998)  
Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (1967)  
Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (1990)  
Nam Le, *The Boat* (2008)  
M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (2008)  
Gabriel Okara, *The Voice* (1964)  
Trinh T. Minh Ha, *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* (1989)

### Essays, Supplements

(PDFs will be made available)

Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man" (1984)  
Gabriel Okara, "African Speech . . . English Words" (1963)  
Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity* (1997)  
Jean Paul Sartre "Black Orpheus"  
Gayatri Spivak, "More on Power/Knowledge" (1993)  
Trinh T. Minh Ha, *Framer Framed* (1992)

## Evaluations

- 30% Discussion Contributions**  
(Daily participation, Leading 1 discussion, 1-page reflections at the end of each unit, 5 total)
- 10% Book/Film Review (3 pages)** that focuses on the usage of language  
(Can be turned in at any point in the semester)
- 20% Short comparative paper (6-7 pages)**  
(Analyze two different usages of language in any of the texts covered in class,  
due at the end of Week 7)
- 30% Conference paper (8-10 pages)** on text/film of choice,  
(to be presented at the end of the term, with final version due a week after)

## Calendar

<b>Limitation &amp; Framing</b>	Week 1	Introductions
	Week 2	<i>Monolingualism of the Other</i> "Black Orpheus"
	Week 3	<i>Dictée</i>
	Week 4	Screening: <i>Surname Viet, Given name Nam</i> Excerpts <i>Framer Framed</i>
<b>Recalcitrance &amp; Violence</b>	Week 5	<i>Black Skin White Masks</i>
	Week 6	<i>Black Skin White Masks</i> "Of Mimicry and Man"
	Week 7	<i>The Tragedy of King Christophe</i>
<b>Memory &amp; Exploration</b>	Week 8	<i>Zong!</i>
	Week 9	"Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice" and other stories, <i>The Boat</i>
<b>Transcription &amp; Translation</b>	Week 10	<i>The Voice</i>
	Week 11	"African Speech . . . English Words" Excerpts <i>Translation and Subjectivity</i>
<b>Poetics &amp; Production</b>	Week 12	"More on Power/Knowledge"
	Week 13	<i>Poetics of Relation</i>
	Week 14	Conclusions