

To Whom It May Concern:

It is with enthusiasm that I submit both this letter and two assignments from my Spring 2018 First-Year Writing Seminar ENGL 1167, Great New Books: African Women Writers, in application for the James F. Slevin Assignment Sequences Prize.

My course asked students to take pleasure in the many facets of “the story” - its motivations, assertions, paradoxes, strategies, and inconsistencies through readings of some of the most recent great books from African women writers (such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Nnedi Okorafor, Helen Oyeyemi, and Lesley Nneka Arimah to name a few). Throughout the course students get the chance to analyze and discover some of the best literature and film coming out of the Continent in the past two decades with works that range from powerful feminist manifestos to strange sci-fi thrillers. The seminar not only focused on supporting students as they learned how to unpack complex themes and ideas within literature and how to confidently articulate interesting thoughts and arguments surrounding these themes, but also sought to teach the importance of some of the most functional elements of collegiate writing, such as discipline appropriate citation methods and carefully proofread deliverables. As a learning community, we fostered an encouraging space for each student to embrace and hone their own unique style of analysis and argumentation.

Throughout, I challenged students to bring their own unique positionalities into difficult and critical conversations that traversed historical, philosophical, spatial, and political contexts. These complex conversations were always informed and “bookended” by the ultimate writing focus of the class; students learned how to articulate complex ideas formed in dynamic seminar discussions through clear and effective prose. This process was facilitated by creative and lengthy assignment sequences that included all necessary scaffolds for the deliberate and meaningful acquisition of fundamental writing skills (e.g. close reading). As you will see in the two assignment sequences attached below, both assignments took place over the course of a number of weeks with multiple rounds of peer review and instructor-student communication built into the process of writing before submission. Beyond the obvious goal of improving specific aspects of the writing skill, for me, these assignments’ most important takeaway for the students comes in the form of a better understanding that writing is always most importantly a process of editing and extensive revision.

Sequence Rationales:

Essay 3: *Lectio Divina*

The first assignment sequence, *Lectio Divina*, comes about midway through the semester (out of five, it is essay number three). The logic of this placement is that I like to allow students to get acquainted and comfortable in class with the skill of close reading ahead of the third essay. This is done through group close readings, where I’ll ask the seminar as a whole to probe fully into a short passage. By demonstrating the skill as a common part of discussion, they arrive at the third essay fully equipped for extended close analysis. Often to their surprise (I should caution that presenting this assignment for the first time in class never fails to prompt looks of terror from at least 2/3rds of the classroom), I have heard from many students that this is their favorite essay of the semester. At its most basic, the essay prompt asks students to select one (and only one!) sentence from a short story collection (in this case *What is Not Yours Is Not Yours*, by Helen Oyeyemi) and take it to the limits of analysis in the form of a 5-6-page close reading. This takes students down to the nuts and bolts of the close reading skill as they must ask themselves: what type of sentence can sustain 5 to 6-pages of analysis?

What types of reading and analytical strategies must I employ to craft a powerful and relevant thesis statement? What types of words or phrases do I often take for granted that deserve closer analysis and attention?

The assignment sequence itself draws on the principles of the monastic *lectio* practice in order to move beyond reading habits that scan for knowledge to a more dynamic engagement that seeks to uncover the many possible meanings of a text. The sequence consists of three main activities that build up to an essay prompt. Part 1 (or *Lectio*) asks students to go to a moment in the text that stood out to them for any reason (it could be something that shocked, brought joy, seemed inconsistent, that excited, etc.) and to then linger. This process of lingering is meaningful. I ask them to read the section more than once, to read it again, but slowly, and then to narrow it down to a paragraph. They then repeat this reading process on the smaller paragraph they have selected until the sentence which they will analyze chooses them. While unusual, this process of reading and rereading and rereading has students engage with words from the story in ways that they were not able to while rushing to read for class discussion. The slowing down of the reading process ushers in an ontological shift. In this new space, the text comes alive and their sentence becomes a key to unlocking the many many meanings of the text as a whole. After selecting their sentence, students post their selections onto our course blog so that they have the opportunity to not only display a meaningful moment in the text for them but to see what moments other students felt drawn to. I have yet to have students in one class select the same moment!

Part 2 (*Meditatio*) asks students to submerge themselves in their selection with abandon. *Meditatio* is done in class so that I can properly frame the activity and talk to the students one-on-one while they are still in the early stages of the assignment. In this stage, I ask them to take the sentence and break it down into every possible fragment. This means researching any possible cultural references, searching the OED for not only primary and secondary definitions but tertiary and beyond. The idea behind *Meditatio* is for the students to meet the sentence on its own terms in search of all the possible meaning it holds. At the end of the session, students often have 3-4 pages of diagrams and word clouds, definitions, and observations handwritten on blank copy paper. When pitched and done correctly, the *Meditatio* exercise should not evince any particular reading of the text, but a hearty brainstorm of all possibilities. Students then are asked to collate their ideas and decide which will become part of the paper and which will be left out as they form thesis statements and drafts for the paper itself.

Part 3 (*Oratio*) has students prepare and deliver informal yet structured presentations of their progress for their peers in order to receive feedback. I find this stage is most successful when students are provided with very clear expectations and guiding questions for the presentation. These guidelines are provided in the assignment below. These are usually individual presentations pitched one at a time to the entire seminar. However, this semester, due to my participation in the peer collaboration program (which required some shifting of the syllabus during the semester to accommodate new material/meetings with students from the other class), I had to restructure the format of these presentations to be done in small groups for the sake of time. There are pros and cons to both models as I found that in small groups students seemed to be having more extensive conversations about where they were in their writing process but the conversations were also limited between the 3 or 4 students in the group. Further, in this simultaneous small group format, I did not have the chance to hear and offer my own verbal feedback on each presentation since I had to hop around from group to group to check in throughout the class period. As I have done in a previous semester, individual presentations worked well because I had the opportunity to engage with each

student's presentation and more than a handful of students were able to offer their suggestions and comments on their peers' work, but this method also takes up significantly more class time and prevents extended dialog between students on ideas. I plan to continue utilizing this assignment sequence in the future and will choose from both models depending on specific time constraints each semester.

By the time students arrive at the writing of the essay, they have already generated so many readings of their sentence through the *Lectio* sequence that writing the paper becomes not a battle with the blank page but instead a process of collating and structuring all of their analysis into one cohesive essay. Despite their skepticism at the original prompt, many of my students have remarked that one of the hardest parts of this essay is sticking to the 5-page limit! The close readings that are produced from this assignment evince not only vast improvements in analysis from their first two essays, but also demystify the process of close reading completely. This allows students to reproduce the skill in miniature on the paragraph level as part of a strong analytical essay throughout the rest of my course and (hopefully!) beyond.

Essay 5: *Edan Project*

In short, the Edan Project asks students to develop a powerful and cohesive argument that can sustain a process of translation across mediums. The project takes up about four weeks of instruction and includes extended collaboration with Camille Andrews, director of the Mann Library Makerspace. The Makerspace, which opened in late Fall 2017 is a fantastic resource for collaborative work and its staff are always looking for classes to utilize its space and tools. While students work actively on this sequence for about a month at the end of the semester, the project requires significant scaffolding across the semester. For this project to be successful students must be completely comfortable and confident with the close reading skill (which I facilitate through the *Lectio* sequence) and familiar with the concept of "making" (this requires dialoguing with staff at the Makerspace far in advance of the semester, scheduling an introductory session at the Makerspace early on in the actual semester, and introducing assignment early and often ahead of the actual prompt assignment). In my second semester of using this sequence, I have found the preparation to be absolutely worth it as the construction of the assignment allows students to consider the skill of writing and creating in tandem, with incredible results.

The project borrows its name from a symbol in Nnedi Okorafor's novella *Binti*. Students are allowed, and encouraged, to work from any text that we have read over the course for the project (this is to encourage a wide variety in topics among students). The project starts with an essay assignment that asks students to analyze the role of a symbol of their choice within a chosen text. After writing, two rounds of peer editing, and submitting the essay, students spend 4-5 class sessions in the Mann Library Makerspace translating their essay's main argument into an original physical or digital artist book (students have created pop-up books, sequenced story cards, immersive virtual reality experiences, and 3-D printed dioramas, to name a few). Through this process of translation, they engage with their essay on completely new terms, often triggering a process of reflection where they realize what did and did not work in their original essays. They receive their papers back during the last week of class instruction with full marks from the instructor. For the course final, students return to their essays and complete a substantial revision of the original essay during the exam period.

Many thanks for your considerations, the assignment sequences are attached below.

Essay 3 Assignment
FWS Great New Books
Instructor: Emma Kioko

Lectio Divina

or Playing with Texts Through Contemplative Close Reading

Rationale: *Lectio divina* (hereafter referred to as *lectio*) is a monastic reading practice most often associated with prayer and preparation for prayer. This assignment sequence draws on the useful guiding principles of the *lectio* practice to cultivate a reading practice that moves beyond a perfunctory search for knowledge to one that uncovers the many meanings that rest beneath a text. One specific characteristic of *lectio* that this sequence will draw from is its underlying assumption that texts (in the case of traditional *lectio*, scripture) are not objects for study but are living documents with endless possibilities for interpretation. This assignment asks you to push a sentence to the limits of analysis; you will produce a 5-page paper from a single sentence in Helen Oyeyemi's collection of short stories, *What is Not Yours is Not Yours*. While this may seem like an overwhelming task, you may be surprised by what you uncover through this exercise of close reading and meditation.

Part 1: LECTIO

Take a moment to think about any story or section of a story from *What is Not Yours is Not Yours* that sticks out in your mind regarding **Oyeyemi's use of language, symbols, motifs, and narrative structure to explore themes of ownership, individual agency, and/or boundaries**. It could be a moment that shocked you, made you feel uncomfortable, made you feel excited, made you want to know more, made you realize something about the text as a whole, etc. This could be an entire chapter or a paragraph, it just has to excite you!

It is important to note that not every section or sentence of the novel will make for a powerful close reading exercise, as you decide what section of the novel to work with, look for contradictions and/or ambiguities within the text that intrigue you and offer insight into Oyeyemi's short story and her interrogation of ownership, individual agency, and/or boundaries within the text.

Read through your selected section, pay attention to your reading speed. Slow down your reading (perhaps by reading aloud) and read the section again. Can you narrow your interest down to a single sentence or two? Select the sentence (or let the sentence select you) that most grabs your attention; read it over and over, slowly. Post this sentence to the course blog by midnight.

Lectio Due: Thursday by 11:59PM, February 22 (post on course blog)

Part 2: MEDITATIO

We will begin this section of the assignment in class on **FRIDAY, February 23** and you will continue to work with these questions on your own.

Take your selected sentence and reproduce it at the top of a blank document, locate all the inconsistencies and intricacies of this moment in the text that led you to select it for this assignment. These are your notes, fill the page up with possible readings and re-readings of your sentence. This step in the process is your moment to become an expert on this sentence. Research and investigate. Look up the definitions of every word, look not only to the first definition, but play with the second, and third listed definitions: do these additional dictionary entries change the meaning? What other meanings can the words in your sentence hold? What references or allegories are hidden within her characters and symbols? How does your selected moment relate to other moments in Oyeyemi's text?

As you work through this *meditatio* stage, you might want to ask yourself:

- What do I notice about the text?
- What patterns or details can I observe both in this section/sentence and its larger context?
- What kinds of images or symbols are used?
- How does this sentence/section relate to the development of the plot, if there is a plot?
- What words or phrases are repeated throughout the text?
- What is the overall tone of the language?
- What is the feeling evoked by the language?

Investigate and excavate every possible lead!

*Please turn in the work from your *meditatio* exercise alongside your final paper.

Part 3: ORATIO

In small groups, you will give a short 5 to 10-minute presentation on the readings and meanings you have uncovered during the *meditatio* exercise. **Share your thoughts on the sentence, and the ways in which it relates to Oyeyemi's larger examination of the themes of ownership, agency, and boundary/or making/taking/erasing throughout the novel and get feedback from your peers on further lines of inquiry.**

While informal, you should be able to discuss the following for your classmates in an organized and structured presentation:

- What is your main claim about themes of ownership, agency, and/or boundaries within the text?
- How do the details you have excavated in Part 1 and 2 function within the larger narrative?
- Do plot and language reinforce one another, or is there a disjuncture between what the text says and how it says it?
- What are you still working through? Are there any gaps in your argument that could benefit from some input from your peers?

Part of the *oratio* exercise includes your participation as a listener. As your peers present their findings, weigh-in! Give them suggestions for further avenues of investigation and/or discuss your own reading of their object of analysis. Help this be a productive experience for all parties!

Due: Monday, February 26 (in-class presentation)

Essay Assignment: Close Reading Essay

Peer Review: Monday, March 5 (bring 1 PRINTED copy of draft to class)

- Peer Review Draft should be at **least** 3-4 pages in length, the more you provide, the better feedback you will get for the revision process (and the less you have to write as you revise!)

Final Deadline: Monday, March 12 (in-class, hardcopy)

Prompt: Write a 5-page paper that utilizes *lectio* and close reading techniques using the sentence(s) you have been playing and working with over the past three assignments. While the topic is open due to the fact that you will all self-select sections of the text to work with, your paper should address themes of ownership, agency, and/or boundaries within Helen Oyeyemi's *What is Not Yours is Not Yours*. **Using the specific place in the text that strikes you, confuses you, or excites you- produce a thesis that explains how this particular moment informs or shapes Oyeyemi's examination of one of these three themes* within the novel.**

Format your essay according to the following guidelines:

- 12-point font, Times New Roman, double-spaced.
- 1-inch page margins all around.
- Your name, name of professor, title of course, date of paper on the first page of the paper.
- Jazzy title for the paper 😊
- A works cited page beginning on a separate page at the end of the paper.
- Papers of less than 5 **full** pages will not receive credit.

*I am happy to discuss papers that focus on a theme not listed here, please seek approval in advance for alternate topics.

Edan Project

Rationale: In Nnedi Okorafor’s most recent Hugo and Nebula award-winning *Binti*, the “edan” is a cube owned by the novella’s protagonist, Binti. As described within the text, an “edan” is an object that is so old that nobody retains memory of its use or potential applications. As Binti discovers through the course of the narrative, her edan is a powerful tool of both protection and *translation*. Drawing on Okorafor’s powerful symbol of the “edan,” as an object of communication and translation, the Edan Project is a transmedia assignment sequence that asks you to trouble the relationship between form and the traditional essay through translation.

After producing a long essay based on a prompt, you will be asked to utilize the Mann Library Makerspace to render your argument, or a specific claim from your essay, into an original artist book (the makerspace can support the creation of objects ranging from zines to buttons to 3-D printed pieces and/or digital medias). This sequence, of writing and then making, attempts to illustrate a parallel between writing and the creative.

The project will ask you to further develop your ability to deliver and construct clear and concise arguments through a process of creation and translation. You will need to craft a thesis/claim that can withstand translation into forms beyond the page while you still maintain the ability to plainly articulate, to an audience, a main theme or argument. After translating your essay into an original artist book, and giving a final in-class presentation on your created object, you will have a chance to return to the written page and submit a paper revision as your final course writing assignment.

Objectives:

- Translate critical analysis and close reading into creative representation by crafting an argument in non-textual form
- Develop skills in using creative tools to produce a multimodal scholarly argument or creative representation

Part One: Essay Assignment

Prompt: A symbol is an important literary device that contains several layers of imbedded meaning, often indiscernible at first glance, and represents several other facets, ideas, or qualities beyond those visible in a literal translation alone. Please select a provocative symbol from any of the literary texts we have read for this course and analyze how it operates throughout the text. In **5-7 pages**, consider the symbol’s significance and analyze the ways in which it enhances the larger narrative.

***Thesis and Object Proposal:** Please submit a proposal, following the paper proposal guidelines provided in-class, consisting of a rough draft/proposed thesis statement and a short description of your proposed artist book to Blackboard by **TUESDAY, April 10 at 11:59PM**. All project ideas will be reviewed by instructor and librarian/Makerspace director Camille Andrews and **must receive approval** before any object construction begins.

As always, format your essay according to the following guidelines:

- 12-point font, Times New Roman, double-spaced.
- 1-inch page margins all around.
- Name of author, name of professor, title of course, date of paper on the first page of the paper.
- Jazzy title for the paper ☺
- A works cited page beginning on a separate page at the end of the paper.
- Papers of less than 5 **full** pages will not receive credit.

Peer Review #1: Friday, April 13

Peer Review #2: Monday, April 23

Final Deadline: Wednesday, April 25 (due in-class, HARDCOPY)

Part Two: Object Making

For the second part of this assignment, you will develop and submit an original and creative artist book that conceptualizes your argument beyond the confines of the 8 ½ by 11 printed page. You may want to refer back to our visit to the “Wake The Form” archival exhibit: the “books” we examined sometimes didn’t look like books at all. Dare to defy the medium of the book, you may envision this as a zine, a “book” constructed of Legos, a video blog, a collage, a collection of buttons, etc. Most importantly, think of this as a process of translation that enables you to retell the story of your chosen symbol and your written paper argument in an innovative way. Use the following questions to help guide you through the “making” process:

1. How will you tell a cohesive story and set forth a clear and comprehensive argument in this new space/media?
2. What kind of language will you use?
3. What kinds of non-word based discursive forms (emojis, hashtags, etc.) will you deploy?
4. What is the beginning, middle, and end of this story, how will you visually or aurally convey your complex argument?
5. How will you convey a complex story/argument in a visually based media/space?
6. How do you create room for conversations expanding past your story to take place in that space?

Final Deadline: Due on your presentation date (see below re: Oral Presentations)

Part Three: Oral Presentations

Each student will prepare an oral presentation detailing their project to the class during the final week of the course. Each presentation should share and demonstrate the created artist book and its relationship to both their chosen text and written essay. This should be a formal and well-planned presentation, that clearly demonstrates your ability to articulate your argument orally. Explain the process of creating the book and the process of translating the written word into a different visual media: where did you succeed? Where do you see room for improvement? What new information about your original argument did the process illuminate?

Presentation order will be assigned at random and posted on the course blog.

Dates: Monday, May 7
Wednesday, May 9

Part Four: Artist Statements and Essay Revision

1. After translating your argument into an artist book, revisit your original paper and reflect on the process of illustrating your argument through your chosen visual media. As you revise your written essay, keep the following in mind:
2. What can be added or deleted to strengthen your original claim?
3. What types of evidence are missing? What evidence can be eliminated or better analyzed?
4. What substantial revisions are necessary to better connect my paper to my object?

For your “final”, along with your revised final paper, please submit a **1 to 2-page single-spaced** artist statement and reflection on your Edan Project*. Use the following questions to guide your response:

1. Describe your piece, the conventions of your chosen media, and how you translated your original analysis into a creative yet accessible artist book.
2. What creative choices did you make, and why?
3. What was the experience of completing this project?
4. How did it differ from previous essay assignments, and how was it similar?
5. Was it easy or difficult to tell your analytical story in a different way? Why or why not?

A note on failure: failure is part and parcel of the making process! Your project might not look the way you envisioned, the materials available or chosen may not be able to create your perfect imagining of the project... and that is 1000% ok. Failure in this project can be critical and, even further, productive. Don't be afraid to address failure (in all its forms) in your artist statement and especially as you go back and revise your final paper.

Artist Statement Due: Tuesday, May 15 by 12 NOON via email

*Please note: If you consent, an image of your project will be made available alongside your artist statement on an [Omeka](#) site that showcases the work this course. All projects will be put on display in Mann Library for the summer and will remain on display unless you indicate otherwise (or come and claim it!).

Sample of Edan Projects, on display in the Mann Library Makerspace:

