REL 4137

Ancestral Voices of the African Diaspora: Theorizing Afro-Diasporic Religious Traditions

Section: U01

Hybrid/Certified

Spring Term 2027

Course Meeting Information

REL 4137 - U01

W 2:00 PM - 3:15 PM

ZIFF 150

Course Time Zone: Eastern Time (ET).

Course due dates and times are according to this time zone.

Course Prerequisites

Course prerequisites, if any, are listed below.

Course Description

Religious traditions travel across borders, bring people from different backgrounds together, and create meaningful relationships that extend far beyond their places of origin. But what happens when individuals encounter these traditions, become initiated, and begin living in religious worlds that may differ significantly from the ones they were raised in?

Ancestral Voices invites students to explore these experiences through ***Spirited Diasporas: Personal Narratives and Global Futures of Afro-Atlantic Religions,*** edited by cultural anthropologist Martin Tsang. Through twelve compelling first-person narratives, students will meet individuals from around the world whose journeys have led them to Afro-Cuban Lucumí, Brazilian Candomblé, Haitian Vodou, and West African Vodun. Their accounts reveal the personal commitments, spiritual encounters, cultural negotiations, and relationships involved in learning and practicing these traditions.

From a Japanese professor establishing a Lucumí religious community in Tokyo to a transgender practitioner navigating initiation into Haitian Vodou, these narratives offer intimate perspectives on religious experiences rarely encountered in conventional academic accounts. They also reveal how people from different racial, cultural, gender, and social backgrounds participate in Afro-Atlantic religious communities, challenging longstanding assumptions about religious identity, authenticity, and belonging.

Throughout the course, students will also be introduced to the theories and research methods cultural anthropologists use to study religion. The course will pay particular attention to **ethnography and autoethnography**, exploring how personal experience, participation, observation, and critical reflection contribute to the production of academic knowledge. Students will examine how religious practitioners document their own experiences, how their relationships with religious communities shape their interpretations, and how researchers navigate the ethical responsibilities of representing sacred traditions.

Through close reading, critical analysis, and thoughtful classroom discussion, students will discover how religious practitioners' experiences shape our understanding of contemporary Afro-Atlantic religions and their expanding global presence. The course encourages students to approach religious narratives with curiosity, engage with unfamiliar perspectives, and consider how lived experiences shape how scholars study and write about

religion.

Textbook and Course Materials

Spirited Diasporas: Personal Narratives and Global Futures of Afro-Atlantic Religions

Required/Recommended: Required

Authors: Tsang, Martin

Publisher: University of Florida Press

Publication Date: 2023

Copyright Date: 2023

ISBN 10: 9781683403906

ISBN 13: 9781683403722

Chapters/Pages: 227 pages

Panther Book Pack

Get all required course materials for $22 per undergrad credit hour through Panther Book Pack. You'll be charged automatically unless you opt out within 3 days after the add/drop deadline.

For more details, to compare costs, and to learn how to access your course materials, visit the Panther Book Pack information page on FIU OneStop.

Student Learning Outcomes/Objectives

- Examine the Religious Worlds of Afro-Atlantic Practitioners: Identify and explain the central religious traditions represented in Spirited Diasporas, including Afro-Cuban Lucumí, Brazilian Candomblé, Haitian Vodou, and West African Vodun. Analyze how practitioners describe their relationships with deities, ancestors, religious communities, and sacred practices, using specific examples from the assigned narratives.
- Analyze Religious Initiation and Lived Experience: Examine first-person narratives to explain how individuals encounter Afro-Atlantic religions and navigate their journeys toward initiation and religious belonging. Analyze the importance of ritual learning, apprenticeship, embodied knowledge, spiritual relationships, and religious kinship in shaping practitioners' experiences and identities.
- Investigate Religious Diversity and the Global Expansion of Afro-Atlantic Traditions: Compare how practitioners from different national, racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual backgrounds encounter and participate in Afro-Atlantic religions. Explain how migration, transnational relationships, cultural adaptation, and religious networks contribute to the establishment and continuation of these traditions across geographical boundaries.

- Examine Identity, Inclusion, and Religious Belonging: Analyze how personal identity, cultural background, gender, and sexuality influence individual experiences within Afro-Atlantic religious communities. Evaluate how practitioners negotiate religious expectations, cultural differences, and questions of belonging, drawing on the experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals and other contributors represented in the volume.
- Understand and Apply Anthropological Research Methods: Define and distinguish ethnography and autoethnography as approaches to studying religion and lived experience. Identify how personal narratives, participant observation, researcher reflexivity, and firsthand experience contribute to anthropological research. Analyze how contributors to Spirited Diasporas document, interpret, and communicate their religious experiences, recognizing the relationship between the researcher, the practitioner, and the production of knowledge.
- Apply Anthropological Theory to the Interpretation of Religious Narratives: Identify and apply relevant anthropological concepts, including ritual agency, transnationalism, religious kinship, and reflexivity, to examine the experiences presented in Spirited Diasporas.

Compare interpretations across selected chapters and explain how theoretical approaches help scholars understand religious practices, cultural adaptation, and the formation of globally connected religious communities.

- Critically Evaluate the Academic Production and Representation of Afro-Atlantic Religions: Examine how first-person narratives contribute to scholarly knowledge and challenge conventional representations of Afro-Atlantic religious traditions. Evaluate the relationship between personal experience, academic interpretation, and the ethical responsibilities involved in documenting religious communities, particularly concerning sacred knowledge, ritual secrecy, and cultural representation. Construct evidence-based interpretations that demonstrate how practitioners' voices can inform and reshape anthropological scholarship.

Expectations of this Course

Hybrid Course Format and Expectations

This is a **hybrid course**, meaning about half of the coursework takes place during scheduled, in-person class sessions, while students complete the remaining coursework independently through Canvas and other assigned activities.

Hybrid courses maintain the **same academic standards and performance expectations as traditional, fully in-person courses**. Because students must manage both classroom and online responsibilities, success requires consistent participation, time management, self-discipline, and familiarity with Canvas and other course technologies.

Students are responsible for staying informed, completing assignments on time, and actively participating in all aspects of the course.

Student Expectations

Students are expected to:

- **Review the Getting Started page** in the Course Modules section of Canvas.
- **Introduce themselves** during the first week by posting in the designated class discussion.
- **Participate actively** in online discussions and engage respectfully with the instructor and classmates.
- **Review the course calendar and weekly modules** to stay informed about readings, assignments, activities, and deadlines.
- **Attend all scheduled in-person class sessions** and arrive prepared to participate.
- **Log in to Canvas regularly throughout the week** to review announcements, course materials, and assignments.
- **Complete discussion posts and responses** by their

designated deadlines.
- **Read and respond to instructor emails without delay**, particularly those concerning course requirements or academic progress.
- **Submit all assignments by their posted deadlines. Late assignments will not be accepted.**

Instructor Expectations

The instructor will:

- **Access Canvas regularly throughout the week** to monitor course activity and student participation.
- **Respond to student emails within 24 hours.**
- **Grade assignments and provide constructive feedback** in a timely manner to support student learning and academic progress.

Please remember: A hybrid course offers greater flexibility in how and where students complete their coursework. However, that flexibility comes with greater responsibility for managing time, meeting deadlines, and remaining actively engaged throughout the semester.

Assignments & Assessments

COURSE ASSESSMENTS AND GRADING COMPONENTS

1. Attendance, Participation, and Facilitation

Attendance, participation, and facilitation are evaluated together as **one combined grade**. Students must fulfill all three expectations to earn full credit for this component.

- **Attendance:** Students are expected to attend scheduled in-person class sessions consistently and punctually. Physical presence is essential to the learning experience, particularly in a course that emphasizes classroom dialogue and shared interpretations of religious traditions.
- **Participation:** Students must be prepared to contribute to classroom discussions when called upon or invited to share their perspectives. Participation includes responding to questions, discussing assigned materials, and demonstrating an understanding of the topics under consideration.
- **Facilitation:** When asked, students must help guide or contribute to the direction of classroom discussions. Facilitation may involve introducing a topic, raising thoughtful questions, explaining concepts from the assigned materials, or encouraging classmates to consider different interpretations.

Important: These three responsibilities constitute a single grading component. Attendance alone does not guarantee full credit. Students must attend class, participate when asked, and fulfill facilitation responsibilities when assigned.

2. Weekly Discussion Forums

Weekly discussion forums are **interactive, time-sensitive**

academic activities that encourage students to exchange ideas, examine different perspectives, and engage with classmates about the week's course material.

Each discussion forum has a designated opening and closing date. Students may participate throughout that period, but they must complete all required contributions before the forum closes.

Because these assignments depend on timely interaction among classmates, **discussion forums cannot be reopened after their deadlines have passed**. Once a forum closes, the opportunity for meaningful peer interaction within that assignment has ended.

Students are responsible for monitoring forum availability, reviewing the instructions, and submitting their contributions within the designated timeframe. Waiting until the final hours of an assignment may limit opportunities to engage with classmates.

3. Socratic Seminar Labs

Socratic Seminar Labs are **weekly, student-led classroom discussions** that encourage critical thinking, thoughtful interpretation, and active engagement with the assigned course materials.

Each week, students will be **selected at random from the class roster** to lead the seminar discussion. Selected students will present their understanding and interpretations of the

weekly readings, concepts, and topics.

These seminars examine how students understand the material, how they arrive at their interpretations, and how those interpretations contribute to a broader classroom conversation.

Student facilitators are expected to:

- Demonstrate familiarity with the assigned weekly materials.
- Present their interpretations clearly and thoughtfully.
- Explain the reasoning behind their observations and conclusions.
- Raise relevant questions that encourage discussion and reflection.
- Engage with classmates' responses and help sustain a productive conversation.

Students should arrive prepared each week, since selections are made randomly. Socratic seminars emphasize discussion and interpretation rather than memorized presentations or formal lectures.

Grading

GRADING CRITERIA

Course Requirements	Number of Items	Points Per Item	Total Weight
Attendance/Participation/ Facilitation	15	20	20%
Discussion Forums	16	20	20%
Socratic Seminar Lab	16	15	15%
Analysis Proposal	1	20	15%
Analysis Paper	1	20	30%
Total	**N/A**	**N/A**	**N/A**

Letter Grade Distribution Table

Letter Grade	Sample Range %
A	95 to 100
A-	90 to 94
B+	86 to 89
B	83 to 85
B-	80 to 83
C+	77 to 79
C	70 to 76
D	60 to 69
F	< 60

Proctored Exams

Please note that the information contained in this section applies only if your course requires a proctored exam.

Through a careful examination of this syllabus, it is the student's responsibility to determine whether this online course requires proctored exams. Please visit our Student Proctored Exam Instructions webpage for important information concerning proctored exams, proctoring centers, and important forms.

Schedule of Topics

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS

- **Week 1:** Introduction: "Why Are You Here?"
- **Week 2:** Afro-Diasporic Religions (ADR)
- **Week 3:** Autoethnography: A Method in the Study of Afro-Atlantic Religions / A Play on Words: Glossary Review
- **Week 4:** Pelerinaj—Pilgrimage
- **Week 5:** Death and Rebirth in African Vodún and Haitian Vodou
- **Week 6:** Crossed Paths: On Becoming Both Anthropologist and Omo Orixá
- **Week 7:** The Scattering and Sharing of Wisdom around the World
- **Week 8:** Making Ocha in Havana
- **Week 9:** Finding Home in the River

- **Week 10:** How I Came to the Tradition
- **Week 11:** Practicing Ifá in Tokyo
- **Week 12:** On Seeking Guidance
- **Week 13:** Finding My Place in the Lucumí Tradition as an African American Woman
- **Week 14:** Beading Spirit: Lessons Learned on Healing and Community in Lucumí
- **Week 15:** A Hermeneutics of Plurality on the Road of the Orisha

Course Communication

Communication in this course will take place via **the Canvas Inbox**. Check out the Canvas Guide to learn how to communicate with your instructor and peers using the Canvas Inbox.

I will respond to all correspondence within **24 hours**.

Policies & Resources

Before starting this course, please review the Policies & Resources Page in Canvas, which includes comprehensive information on various University and Course Level Policies, such as:

- University Policies
- Accessibility and Accommodations
- Online Etiquette

- Technical Requirements and Skills
- Computer & Digital Literacy Skills
- Course Technology Accessibility Statements and Privacy Policies
- Academic Integrity
- Copyright Statement
- Nondiscrimination Statement
- Panthers Care & Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)
- Fair Use Policy

Zoom Video Conference

Zoom is a video conference tool that you can use to interact with your professor and fellow students by sharing screens, chatting, broadcasting live video/audio, and taking part in other interactive online activities.

Zoom meetings can be accessed via the Zoom link in the course navigation menu. Once you click on the Zoom link, it will route you to join the meeting for the respective class session. You will also be able to view upcoming meetings, previous meetings that you have already joined, and meeting recordings. Before joining an actual class session:

- Reference the Zoom Student Tutorials to learn about the tool, how to access your meeting room, and share your

screen.

- Access the Zoom Test Meeting Room to test out the software before joining an actual session.

If you encounter any technical difficulties, please contact the FIU Canvas Help Team. Please ensure you contact support immediately upon the issue occurring.

Nondiscrimination Statement

The **Office of Civil Rights (OCR)** is responsible for ensuring that FIU maintains a workplace and learning environment free from discrimination, where current and prospective faculty, staff, and students are treated equitably. If any student, employee, or applicant has a sincere and reasonable belief that they have been discriminated against or harassed based on age, color, disability, marital status, ethnic or national origin, race, religion, retaliation, sex, or any other protected category, they can report their concerns to the OCR team through report.fiu.edu.