

Module Description

I developed a module for ENGL 371: *Twentieth- and Twenty-first Century Drama and Performance*. This 3-credit course for undergraduate majors is a study of drama and performance from World War II to the present; faculty members have latitude in the organizing theme and selection of texts assigned. I have chosen different themes for each iteration of the course I have taught; one of them was entitled, “Visions of Home,” in which I organized the course around competing ways that the concept of home has been interrogated and theatricalized on stage. Moving chronologically (1950s-2000s), I devised modules (“domesticity and tragedy,” “spatial segregation and realism,” “the politics of neighborhood,” “suburban landscapes”) that offered entry points into the play texts.

Even though the course did include some readings about the relationship between theater and the global city, the first time I explored “Visions of Home” as my organizing concept, I did not connect any of the course material to Queens. None of the plays I had selected were based in Queens, and I also had not figured out how to implement a place-based mode of inquiry in a course so focused on close reading and historical context—although it was something I had wanted to do.

To create this module I removed one of the Arthur Miller plays from the syllabus (*All My Sons*) and substituted a different Miller play, *A View from The Bridge* (1955), and replaced a contemporary play set in Los Angeles (Culture Clash’s *Chavez Ravine*, 2003) with a contemporary play set in Queens, entitled *Queens* (2018) by Martyna Majok. With these two texts as anchors, I designed a module that replaced the final paper with a “Living Photo” assignment prompting students to connect the material directly to the local environs of Queens, while still fulfilling the learning outcomes (comparing structural aspects of dramatic literature, practicing close readings of play texts). This project engages Queens and place in a few ways: it tasks students to consider the ways that two different playwrights represent place in their work, and then to take inspiration from the urban environment to consider more deeply the lives and perspectives of characters.

Note: When I applied to the Pedagogy workshop, I planned to work on a different course, ENGL 701: Graduate Methodology, our required MA methods course. I shifted to 371, a course in which it is more feasible to build toward a culminating exploration like the “Living Photo” project, rather than insert a stand-alone module. I am hopeful that I will be able to revise and incorporate a version of it in ENGL 701.

Catalog Description:

ENGL 371: Twentieth- and Twenty-first Century Drama and Performance.

A study of drama and performance from World War II to the present. Topics may include theatre of the absurd; musical theatre; political theatre; expanding explorations of gender, sexual, racial, and ethnic identities; installations, “happenings,” and performance art. Writers may include Edward Albee, Samuel Beckett, Lillian Hellman, Suzan-Lori Parks, Harold Pinter, Wole Soyinka, Tennessee Williams, August Wilson, and recent experimental dramatists and performance artists.

Course Description:

Visions of Home in Post-War Drama and Performance

This course surveys twentieth- and twenty-first century drama from World War II to the present by exploring how dominant post-war artistic movements responded to urban development, suburbanization, and changing definitions of home. We will begin with American realism, focusing on the dream of middle-class attainment through property ownership. We will explore plays tackling issues of housing discrimination and the desire for homeownership across different regions and communities during the Civil Rights movement, and examine the dramatic conflicts arising from territory, property, and identity in American post-war theatre. We will also cover representations of domestic life shattered by the societal upheavals and revolutionary politics of the 1960s and 1970s, dramatic responses to the urban “ghetto,” and site-specific performance about the instability of the renter’s life. As we go, we will ask how playwrights have used the setting of the home space to dramatize class divisions, present new representations of ethnic identity and neighborhood community, and depict post-recession housing inequities.

Course Learning Outcomes

- Identify, analyze, and compare thematic and structural aspects of dramatic literature.
- Practice close reading and analysis of play texts.
- Acquire understanding of the relevant historical, aesthetic, social, and political contexts for theatrical texts and performances.
- Conduct research on a topic relevant to course readings and discussion.
- Collaborate with peers through shared work, open discussion, and feedback.
- Evaluate and apply critical and theoretical approaches to the study of dramatic literature.
- Practice developing, writing, and revising academic and creative writing.

Module Learning Outcomes

- Practice close reading and analysis of works of dramatic literature for their spatial dimension.
- Create a visual representation of neighborhood and community that engages course themes and concepts.
- Complete a written work that compares dramatic storytelling practices, strategies, and techniques.

Module: Majok’s *Queens* and the Living Photograph Project

In an earlier module, we **read** Arthur Miller’s *A View from the Bridge* and **watch** it in performance using a contemporary staging available through National Theatre at Home. This 1955 play is set in an Italian immigrant community in Red Hook, Brooklyn. The play tells the story of Eddie, a longshoreman whose family life is upended when his wife’s cousins—who have been smuggled into the U.S. to work on the docks—move into his apartment and one of them courts Eddie’s niece. Eddie’s extreme protectiveness and paranoia sets him on a violent, obsessive path, culminating in a betrayal: he reveals their location to Immigration officials and both cousins are arrested and deported. During that module we **complete a research assignment** in which students identify different “keywords” of post-war drama and performance.

In the final module we will **read** and **discuss** Martyna Majok's 2018 play, *Queens*, which is about eleven immigrant women from different countries of origin who cross paths in an illegal basement apartment in Queens. Our class discussions and in-class, low-stakes writing will compare the structural and thematic aspects of *Queens* and *A View from the Bridge*, with a focus on how each playwright creates a sense of space and place on stage. In what ways do these dramatizations of migration stories written in many decades apart (1950s vs. 2001-2017) feel similar or different?

We will also read a supplemental essay from the literary critic Raymond Williams as a theoretical framework for analyzing these two plays as modern/contemporary tragedies. In Fall of 2025, MTC Theater will be producing a revival of *Queens*, but this of course won't be the case every time I teach the class...but we will still consider *why* a theater might produce this play today, and whether plot lines and conflicts would change in significance according to its production context. We will do the same for the National Theatre production of *A View from the Bridge*.

The module will also include extensive in-class discussions of the final project, which is designed as a multi-part assignment that relies on prior work in the course.

Final project: *Living Photograph*

Part 1: Choose one character from *A View from the Bridge* and one character from *Queens*. For each character:

- Take an immersive neighborhood walk with your character—try to see the streets from their perspective. Your goal is to find three sites in Queens and choose a particular “view” to photograph. Create a caption for each: What does your character see when they look at that view? Why are they there? What does the site you have photographed communicate about them, their lives, their wants? You should do this twice—on two separate days—and collect six images: three for each character.
- We will discuss strategies for our walks and complete a supplemental reading about wayfinding as performance. If you are unfamiliar with Queens and you would like some ideas for locations to explore, refer to the chapter, “Queens.” *You do not need to use these ideas*—you have the entire borough to choose from.
- Optional: at each site you choose, record a short (10-30 second) audio file. How does the sound capture what the image does not?

Part 2: Write a 500-word monologue for each character, set at one of the sites you have photographed. [Earlier in the semester we will have completed a monologue assignment, “Past/Present/Future.”]

Part 3: Gallery Presentation. On the final day of class, you will have 5-7 minutes to present your two monologues and six images.

Part 4: In a 4-page essay, explain how your two characters navigate urban space; you can highlight similarities, differences—or both. Use at least *two* examples from each play as

evidence for how your characters understand the world around them, survive when confronted with obstacles, and what influences their perspective on their street, home, or borough.

Materials needed:

- Arthur Miller, *A View from the Bridge* (Penguin Classics, 1955, available low-cost)
- Arthur Miller, *A View from the Bridge* (National Theatre at Home, 2015, streamed in class for free)
- Martyna Majok, *Queens*, 2018 (PDF)

Supplemental readings:

- Raymond Williams, “From Hero to Victim, the Making of Liberal Tragedy” (1966)
- *A People’s Guide to New York City: “Queens”* (Chapter 3), Carolina Bank Muñoz, Penny Lewis, Emily Molina.
- Misha Myers, “‘Walk with Me, Talk with Me’: The Art of Conversive Wayfinding,” *Visual Studies* 25.1 (2010): 59–68.