Régine Michelle Jean-Charles

Associate professor of French

Recently taught: “Haiti Chérie: Haitian Literature and Culture” and “Black Feminisms 101”


Years on faculty: Ten

“The political role of literature is an old concept. In French, it’s called engagement. There were writers in 20th-century Africa—Sembène Ousmane of Senegal, Ahmadou Kourouma of Ivory Coast, and Cameroon’s Mongo Beti—who felt literature had to have a role beyond art. Enough with the poems about trees and flowers! Write a poem about the struggle against oppression. In the context of francophone African and Caribbean literature, which I primarily study, this is a big topic. In the late-20th and 21st centuries, writers such as
Henri Lopès of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Alain Mabanckou, who was born in the Republic of Congo, pushed back. Why, just because we’re African, do we have to write about social justice? What if we want to write about the flowers?

Gender justice is the theme that animates most of my research, writing, and teaching. How do we create a world in which women are safe? How do we create a world in which women are considered equal and treated equally? How do we make people care?

We know that in this country one in five women will be raped in her lifetime. It’s a terrible statistic. Yet so often the word rape is misrepresented. I once heard a student say, ‘That test raped me.’ The word is used symbolically, or it’s normalized, or it’s denied altogether.

Why ask literature to explore terrible, sad issues rooted in reality? Why not leave it to the social sciences? The answer lies in the relationship between reality and representation. It can be easier to read truth once-removed than to hear it from a survivor’s mouth. Literature creates a space in which to see the world.

My students read *The Color Purple* as the fiction it is. But I also ask them to hold onto that one-in-five statistic, and imagine a different world.”