

English MA Course Descriptions

2017 FALL

ENGL 636: History of Literary Criticism

Steve Kruger

Class no. 31456

TUE 4:40–6:30PM

We all read theoretically. That is, we all read with some set of assumptions (both explicit and implicit) about what the written (or other cultural) work in front of us is, how it was fashioned, how readers (like us) are meant to respond to it, whether and how we are supposed to “figure it out,” what its role in a larger cultural (and social and political) frame might be, and so forth. In this course, we will examine a wide range of literary and cultural theory, works that reflect explicitly on what it is that a text does in the world and how it means; what authorship is, and the ways in which authors are implicated in their historical moments; how the cultural, social, political, and historical surroundings of a text are significant; and how readers read. The course will survey a number of influential theoretical approaches (such as psychoanalysis, materialism, formalism, and feminism), but any survey of such a large field will be necessarily incomplete. Our main goals will be (1) to grapple with a set of challenging and exciting theoretical essays and (2) to examine how working with these texts might make us better, more self-aware, flexible, and innovative readers.

ENGL 701: Seminar in Graduate Methodology

Talia Schaffer

Class no. 31460

WED 6:40–8:30PM

When you sit down to write a thesis, what does that mean and how can you do it? This course will tell you. We’ll investigate which websites are reliable, discuss how to find useful on-line resources, and explore how to find the best printed articles and books. Not only will we learn how to find the right sources, we will also study how to read and use them properly. We’ll figure out what makes an article good (and how to tell if it’s good at a glance), and we’ll discuss how criticism has changed over the last few decades. You’ll work on your own research project, and also do some shorter assignments to learn how to use various research techniques. This course is designed to help you get ready to write your thesis.

ENGL 629: Major Modern Writers
Literature and Virtuosity

Cliff Mak

Class no. 31453

WED 4:40–6:30PM

What makes a modern writer “major”? This question—you may find it cheeky or not—is the starting point for this course, which takes as its task the exploration of twentieth-century literature’s self-conscious and vexed relation to cultural status and authority. Beginning with the modernists—James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Franz Kafka, and Samuel Beckett—we will ask what *formally* indicates that a text is vying for a position of cultural and aesthetic prestige: whether this includes the incorporation of that aspiration into narrative form itself (as a *Künstlerroman*, for example) or slightly harder-to-formulate matters of “virtuoso” diction and style.

We will also ask whether this concept of virtuosity remained productive for later writers even after the crucible of modernism had run its course. Virtuoso writers such as Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Muriel Spark, John Ashbery, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Toni Morrison, for instance, were and are clearly indebted to their modernist forebears while also not feeling limited, arguably, by modernism’s doctrinal parameters of aesthetic autonomy and totalization in the face of impassable historical fragmentation. What, then, does this mean for their virtuosity? Without the pressurizing impulse towards aesthetic unity, does virtuosity become merely an ornamental show of technical skill, even a gimmick (and therefore a style of minor-ness)? Or, does the expansiveness of virtuosity, once untethered from modernism’s sense of historical futility, offer vital new ways to engage with history aesthetically—especially in terms of race, gender, and sexuality?

Finally, this course will couple primary readings with theoretical ones, sampling a long history of modern thought on the utility of style that includes Kant, Adorno, Benjamin, Bergson, Barthes, Sontag, Said, Deleuze, Ronell, and Ngai. For of paramount importance in this day and age is the question not only of *style’s* utility but also that of theory and criticism’s usefulness: now that contemporary power has split, as we have just witnessed, into the polar ideologemes of technocratic expertise and reckless whim, what is the place of both the writer and the critic in the world—and at the end of history?

ENGL 681: Special Studies

#WeNeedDiverseBooks: Children's and YA Literature

Carrie Hintz

Class no. 31459

WED 4:40–6:30PM

The #WeNeedDiverseBooks movement advocates greater racial and cultural inclusiveness in children's literature. On their website, they declare their aim: to put "more books featuring diverse characters into the hands of all children." They envision "A world in which all children can see themselves in the pages of a book." Our seminar will examine the strategies and interventions of the #WeNeedDiverseBooks movement—and related initiatives—while considering the contributions of critical race theory, feminist theory, dis/ability theory, and queer theory to the scholarly field of Children's Literature. How is social media facilitating and enabling discussion in the field?

We will read some of the recent books recommended on the #WeNeedDiverseBooks website and articles by scholars who study diversity and inclusion in children's literature. We will also consider revisions of canonical Children's Literature, such as Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark House* (1999), which offers a challenge and alternative to the stereotypical portrayal of Native Americans in Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* books. Several weeks of our seminar will be devoted to examining how contemporary Children's Literature grapples (or fails to grapple) with historical atrocity and racialized violence of the past, especially New World slavery. How should the historical injustices and atrocities of the past be portrayed in children's literature, especially for very young children? What venues are available to tell these stories, and how are these books disseminated and taught?

ENGL 721: Studies in Seventeenth-Century Literature

Utopia, Past, Present, and Future

Andrea Walkden

Class no. 31461

TUE 6:40–8:30PM

A Greek pun on "good place" (*eu-topos*) and "no place" (*ou-topos*), the English word Utopia was coined by Thomas More when he published his *Utopia* in 1516. By then utopian world making, the invention and intricate elaboration of fictional societies, imaginary commonwealths, and ideal states, was a long-standing literary and philosophical practice that claimed Plato's *Republic* (380 BCE) as its illustrious founder text. We'll be reading a broad spectrum of early modern Utopian fiction, beginning with

More's *Utopia* (1516) and including Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1624), Margaret Cavendish's *Blazing World* (1666), Henry Neville's *Isle of Pines* (1668), and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). Together, we'll reflect upon the constraints and advantages of utopian thinking, paying attention to how these fictions negotiate what Frederic Jameson has termed "the Utopian leap," the gap between an empirical present and the utopian/dystopian arrangements of an imaginary future. We'll explore how utopian fictions propose radical reforms, debating the value of centralizing institutions and practices, such as colonialism and slavery, sexual communism and eugenics, scientific advancement and environmental destruction; how they variously function as thought experiments, theories of human nature, nostalgic disavowals, prehistories of capitalism and globalization, progressive manifestos, and visionary social schemes. We'll also debate how these early modern texts anticipate and/or refuse the concerns of modern and contemporary utopianisms, variously represented by Marx's *Communist Manifesto* (1848), Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1920), Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), the Occupy movement, and Chang Rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* (2014).

ENGL 729: Studies in Modern Literature

Contemporary Poetry and the Political Landscape

Nicole Cooley

Class no. 31463

MON 4:40–6:30PM

"Poetry is a political act because it involves telling the truth," poet and founder of the Poetry for the People program at UC-Berkeley June Jordan said in 1998. "And at our current moment, the status of language, politics and truth is more complicated and vexed than ever. This course will investigate contemporary poetry's relationship to "truth" by reading a range of poetry published in the last five years, in order to think deeply about the intersection of history, the documentary and politics. After talking about some of the central texts that stage these questions by Jordan, Adrienne Rich, and Audre Lorde, we will turn to a consideration of new collections of poems which engage with present day political questions, particularly collections which engage with political questions through hybrid forms. In addition to discussing poetry and poetics, we will talk about how the relationship to literary citizenship and writing has been reconfigured by literary organizations such as Cave Canem, Kundiman, and VONA, as well as Split This Rock.

Poetry collections we will read may include Layli Long Solider, *Whereas*; Molly McCully Brown, *The Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded*; Solmaz Sharif, *Look*; Terrance Hayes, *Wind in a Box*; Jennifer S. Cheng, *House A*; Roger Sedarat, *Haji as Puppet: an Orientalist Burlesque*, as well as *The Best American Poetry* of 2017.

Possible critical and theoretical texts are Claudia Rankine, ed., *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*; Dorothy Wang, *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry*; and Gillian White, *Lyric Shame*, as well as texts by Lauren Berlant, Stephen Burt, David Orr.

ENGL 781: Special Seminar

Terminally Dated: Recycled Adaptations, Reframed Plots, & Reanimated Narratives

Duncan Faherty

Class no. 31474

MON 6:40–8:30PM

In 2014 the playwright Brandon Jacobs Jenkins adapted Dion Boucicault's 1859 play *The Octoroon* for the contemporary theater and restaged it as *An Octoroon*. In so doing, he reproduced much of Boucicault's original language even as he reframed the earlier production in order to complicate its antebellum meditation on American racial politics. "Strange as it seems," the critic Ben Brantley wrote in a *New York Times* review, "a work based on a terminally dated play from more than 150 years ago may turn out to be this decade's most eloquent theatrical statement on race in America today." Jenkins' adaption is part of a long literary history of such reanimations and re-framings, a recent iteration of a longstanding practice of reworking earlier texts in order to surface, critique, unpack, and reanimate their depictions of power, colonialism, race, gender, and cultural formation. This course seeks to explore this process of recycling by placing such reimagined texts into conversation with their earlier models. By reading across and between these juxtapositions, we will move to consider how this literary practice has been deployed to press for political change or as a means of offering social commentary. We will, in other words, explore how texts like *An Octoroon* (2014) self-consciously return to previous literary constructions as a means of repurposing their plots for divergent ends (which might include such innovations as, for example, giving voice to characters who had previously only been caricatures or by seeking to explode implied social critiques into central plot devices). In addition to our juxtaposition of Jenkins' and Boucicault's plays we will also consider, William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (and its vision on the one hand of a tragic and heroic colonialism and on the other of the figure of the artist as cultural producer on the other), alongside John Dryden's *The Enchanted Island* (which reworks Shakespeare to think about the dangers of new world social reproduction), Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest* (a postcolonial reordering of Shakespeare's play), the 1950s film *Forbidden Planet* (which restages questions of colonialism in the new frontier), and Neil Gaiman's graphic novel *The Graveyard Book* (which tropes on *The Tempest* in order to stage a farewell to one's life as an artist). Another unit will focus on Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, and move to complicate it by reading

Nancy Rawl's *My Jim* (which reimagines Jim through the narrative perspective of his enslaved wife), John Clinch's *Finn* (centered on Huck's father and which reimagines Huck's ancestry), and John Keene's story "Rivers" (a kind of updating of Jim's story that imagines the racial and queer fallout of Twain's novel). We will conclude with a unit centered around Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (and its vision of white masculine mastery), Unca Eliza Winkfield's *The Female American* (a female Robinsonade), J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (a post-modern female Robinsonade), Adrian Mitchell's play *Man Friday* (which reimagines the plot from the perspective of the indigenous "Friday"), and the film version of Andy Weir's novel *The Martian* (which in technologically restages white male mastery in space). In addition to these primary readings we will also be reading a wide range of critical and theoretical texts.

ENGL 781: Special Seminar
(Post)Colonial Literature and Anti-Colonial Activism

Natalie Léger

Class no. 31475

THU 4:40–6:30PM

In this course, we will explore how art responds to activism or emerges from activism, paying particular attention to 20th century anti-colonial protestation. In doing this, we will attend to the conceptual power of revolution in arts and letters, specifically: the alluring imaginative hold revolution has for colonized peoples and formerly colonized peoples in the Americas, Africa, and South Asia. Of import here is how the history and lived reality of subjugation, by way of slavery, colonialism, imperialism and/or puppet dictatorship, shapes not only the tenor of anti-colonial activism but the form and presentation of the texts in question. The novels, poems and films that we will discuss are key texts in a tradition of writing dedicated to radically transforming how individuals collectively think and imagine existence. Accordingly, as we read fiction from writers like Aimé Césaire, Rabindranath Tagore, Alejo Carpentier and J.M. Coetzee or view films from Sembène Ousmane and Gillo Pontecorvo we will also read the writing of anti-colonial thinker-activists like C.L.R James, Frantz Fanon, Mahatma Gandhi and Amílcar Cabral, among others. We will assess fiction and film alongside anti-colonial political writing in order to better understand the political stakes shaping how and why the artists we discuss produced the art that they did. Ultimately, our exploration of anti-colonial activism will foster awareness of the immense, imaginative and cognitive, work *that is* the act of thinking existence anew.

ENGL 781: Special Seminar
Experiments in Memoir

Jason Tougaw

Class no. 31476

THU 6:40–8:30PM

Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014) is a memoir in verse. "To try to write a straight narrative would have been dishonest," she explains. "The memory of my childhood is a lyrical one. . . . Look at the line breaks. It's like, here's this memory, and now let me take you to the next moment in time. I feel like in poems I'm showing the great simplicity and the utter complication of the moment." Discussing her memoir *Woman Warrior* (1976), Maxine Hong Kingston makes a related observation about autobiography and truth: "I felt that to write truly about somebody you have to know what they were dreaming about, and a dream is fiction." Woodson and Kingston are in good company. For many memoirists, writing an honest account of life means asking difficult questions about truth, memory, and writing. These writers mix or blend the conventions of multiple genres, including poetry, fiction, journalism, diary, and visual art. In this course, we'll survey memoirs that experiment with form to tell life stories that reach beyond simple or received truths about identity, culture, history, politics, psychology, emotion, physiology, family, aging, illness, migration, sex, work, and art. In addition to Woodson and Kingston, we'll likely read memoirs by Gertrude Stein, James Baldwin, Ellen Forney, Alison Bechdel, Kazim Ali, Karl Ove Knausgaard, Thi Bui, and Joe Brainard. We'll also read autobiography theory by Linda Anderson, Nancy K. Miller, Philippe Lejeune, Paul John Eakin, Sidonie Smith, and Julia Watson. Students will have the opportunity to experiment with writing both memoir and literary criticism. Because there are too many experimental memoirs for us to read together, each student will conduct an oral presentation and write an online book review of a text that's not on our list (but probably should be).

ENGL 681: Special Studies (cross-listed with Italian 713)

Dante's *Divina Commedia*

Karina Attar (Karina.Attar@qc.cuny.edu)

Class no. 49921

TUE 5:00–6:50PM

This combined undergraduate/graduate course will focus on the aesthetic, cultural, philosophical, political, and theological perspectives that inform Dante's works, particularly the *Divine Comedy's* first canticle, *Inferno*. We will analyze the *Inferno's* structure, language, rhyming scheme, and allegories; Dante's tripartite role as author,

narrator, and protagonist; the legends, myths, and historical events, protagonists, and sources (both textual and oral) that inform the poem; and the broader political and socio-cultural contexts of late thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century Florence, Italy, and Europe. We will also consider the *Comedy's* enduring influence in modern and contemporary culture and arts. Assignments for graduate students will include short reading responses, an oral presentation, and a final research paper.

ENGL 791: Thesis Course

Class no. 31472

Department consent required. Please email Bill Orchard, the Acting Director of Graduate Studies for Fall 2017, at worchard@qc.cuny.edu if you wish to enroll in this course.

ENGL 795: Independent Study

Class no. 31477

Department consent required. Please email Bill Orchard, the Acting Director of Graduate Studies for Fall 2017, at worchard@qc.cuny.edu if you wish to enroll in this course.