MA in Global Literature and Culture, University of York

Core Module, Autumn Term, 2017

Debating Global Literary Culture, 1800–Present

Convenor: Dr Ben Holgate

All students on the MA in Global Literature and Culture embark on the core module. In this module students gain a strong grounding in the key theoretical developments and debates that have shaped our understanding of ‘global’ literature. Debating Global Literary Culture, 1800–Present interrogates the key tools of postcolonial studies, mapping their continued usage and probing their relation to the contemporary global dispensation. The module helps students to navigate canonical texts and debates in postcolonial studies as well as recent debates about world literature, and to respond to texts in these areas in a critically informed fashion. Students are expected to raise questions about the processes and legacies of empire, especially in relation to literary history. They are invited to link these issues to widespread and well-known theoretical concerns with identity politics, equality claims, and human rights. If postcolonial studies worked to ensure the resistant force of populations working against empire was recognized as globally significant, this module will help tie such recognition to contemporary debates about political resistance to capitalism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, ableist/normalcy discourse, ecological degradation and disaster, and the circulation of literary and cultural texts in English. Across the module, key theoretical texts and literary examples are connected to cultural texts more broadly and political debates. Students can follow up on debates in class in small, peer-led discussion groups, through the suggested set of linked films, and via the wide range of related talks the Department of English and partner departments offer. This will be a challenging, theoretically investigative and lively module ensuring that students get off to a global start to the MA. Students from MAs other than Global Literature and Culture are also very welcome to choose this module as an option.

2015 Module Structure: In Brief

Week 2: Establishing Postcolonial Theory (Holgate)

Week 3: ‘Am I not a Man and a Brother?’: Abolitionist discourse and the ‘Negro Question’ (Watt)

Week 4: Irishness, Coloniality and the Creation of Authenticity (Campbell)

Week 5: Islam, Identity and Politics Before & After the Rushdie Affair (Holgate)

Week 6: Reading Week

Week 7: Establishing World Literature Theory (Holgate)

Week 8: Playwrights and Human Rights (Morin)

Week 9: Topographies of Latin American Poetry: The Strange Case of Gabriela Mistral and Octavio Paz (Asciuto)

Week 10 – Nordic Cool: The Question of Aesthetics (Kingston-Reese)
Week 2: Establishing Postcolonial Theory (Ben Holgate)

How did ‘postcolonial theory’ as it came to be known in the 1980s – an offshoot of what had already, and equally problematically, come to be known as ‘poststructuralism’ – turn into the variegated field that would more accurately be described today as ‘postcolonial studies’? How has this intellectual movement changed and developed since its inception, and what pressures, internal and external to it, have precipitated its development? Where does it seem to be going? What are the current debates about its limitations and shortcomings? In our first class, we will explore these questions and try to identify the key contexts, histories, and theories of postcolonial studies, with a view to understanding the critical formations, past and present, that inform our own practices.

Required Reading

1. All students research definitions of key historical terms for brief discussion: mercantilism; colonialism; neocolonialism; imperialism.

2. All students read:
   
   
   
   

3. Students select for brief presentation (max. 5 minutes) and discussion one of the texts within the formations or force-fields of postcolonial theory above. Presentations should be descriptive rather than analytical at this stage.
Secondary Readings Within Each sub-field


(iii) Subaltern studies: In *Selected Subaltern Studies*, Ranajit Guha, “Preface” (35-36) and “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India” (37-44).


In * Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, Young, Chapter 24: “India III: Hybridity and Subaltern Agency” (337-359)


Further Secondary Reading


**Week 3: ‘Am I not a Man and a Brother?’: Abolitionist discourse and the ‘Negro Question’ (Jim Watt)**

In this seminar we will begin with a discussion of the complex and fascinating poem ‘Slavery’, written by the Tory evangelical Hannah More in 1788, as the campaign to abolish the Atlantic slave trade began to gain momentum. We will then go on to consider what happens to the abolitionist rhetoric of ‘brotherhood’ after the emancipation of slaves in Britain’s sugar colonies in 1834, looking in particular at Thomas Carlyle’s 1849 ‘Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question’, and John Stuart Mill’s rejoinder ‘The Negro Question’ of 1850 (photocopies of all these works will be provided). With reference to this material, we will think about ideologies of empire and discourses of race in the late eighteenth and early to mid-nineteenth centuries, and also consider some competing accounts of the abolitionist movement in recent histories of the British Empire.

**Recommended Reading**


**Week 4: Irishness, Coloniality and the Creation of Authenticity (Matt Campbell)**

This seminar will consider some of the political, cultural and linguistic concerns shaping the construction of a national literature in colonial Ireland, paying attention to the movement known as the Irish Revival. Between (broadly) 1880 and 1910, small groups of Irish writers tried to create ‘authentic’ representations of Irishness by drawing on ancient Celtic myths and popular folklore. Our readings will lead us to pay particular attention to the question of translation, which is central to their endeavour. We will examine a range of texts in English which are characterised by an innovative approach to translation and to English syntax, and...
we will discuss the debates about language, nationhood and culture which shaped their emergence.

Primary texts will be available as handouts due to their short length. I will email you to let you know when they are available for collection and where you can collect them from.

**Required Reading (reading them in this order may be helpful)**


Declan Kiberd, ‘Love Songs of Connacht’ (from *Irish Classics*).


**Secondary Reading**

Sinéad Garrigan Mattar, *Science, Primitivism, and the Irish Revival* (see the introduction and the chapter entitled ‘The Rise of Celtology’)


**Week 5: Islam, Identity and Politics Before & After the Rushdie Affair (Ben Holgate)**

In discussions of postcolonial or diasporic literature, questions of faith and religious identity have tended to be subsumed under such categories as ethnicity, nationality, and ‘race’. Yet some critics suggest that the relative neglect that postcolonial theory has shown to religion may be partly due to its unwitting valorisation of ‘a secular, Euro-American stance’ (Amin, 2005: 17). A character in Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator* argues that ‘Even Fanon […] had no insight into the religious feelings of the North Africans he wrote about’. In this session, we will attempt to redress the critical imbalance, while guarding against the urge to overcompensate and privilege religion at the expense of other components of identity. Using insights drawn from anthropological, religious studies, and sociological research we consider the important and dynamic role of religion, specifically Islam, in contributing towards cultural identity and literary practices.

We think about Salman Rushdie’s controversial novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988) and the intellectual heat generated in what became known as the Rushdie affair. After that, we explore the politics surrounding and representations of Islam from the 1990s to the present, which particularly emphasize the issue of ‘fundamentalism’. Finally, we consider nuanced texts produced by Muslims in the years following the 2001 Burnley, Oldham and Bradford riots in the UK, the World Trade Center attack in the United States later that year, and the

**Required Reading**


**Secondary Reading**


***Week 6: Reading Week***

**Week 7: Establishing World Literature Theory (Ben Holgate)**

This session explores historical and contemporary theories on world literature, beginning with Goethe’s concept of Weltliteratur and continuing to present-day concerns regarding globalisation, imbalances with the production and circulation of texts, the digital age, and translation. A key aim is to investigate world literature from perspectives outside the Anglo-American academic and publishing spheres, thereby helping students to interrogate their own reception of ideas in relation to literatures and cultures from around the world. The class will
investigate how and why various terms have been devised to think about literature on an international plane and beyond a nationalist context, such as “world literature”, “global literature”, “transnational literature”, “the world republic of letters”, and “world-literary system”. Students will gain an appreciation of various methodologies – like “deep time”, “distant reading” and “untranslatability” – that attempt to address the relational interconnectedness of literatures from different geographical regions, cultures, languages, literary traditions, and historical periods. We also discuss how issues like environmentalism, human rights, and migration have emerged within world literature discourse.

Required Reading


Secondary Reading


Week 8: Playwrights and Human Rights (Emilie Morin)

In this seminar, we will consider some facets of the rich history of political theatre, and we will pay particular attention to the global rise of a political theatre concerned with human rights after the 1970s. We will focus on two case studies: Arthur Miller’s short play I Think about You a Great Deal (An Expression of Solidarity with Václav Havel) (1983) and Seven Jewish Children by Caryl Churchill (2009). We will reflect on what these texts tell us about the kinds of political affirmations available to writers, and about the ways in which theatre can attempt to further the remit of public debate about human rights and social justice. We will also discuss the political debates to which these plays respond, and the public controversies that they have ignited (in this regard, will pay particular attention to Seven Jewish Children). The seminar will be framed by a consideration of the theoretical reflections that have surrounded the relation between human rights and contemporary liberal thought, via Jacques Rancière’s re-examination of Hannah Arendt’s work and Luc Boltanski’s conceptualisation of ‘distant suffering’.

All the primary reading and all the suggested secondary reading is available online, via the VLE Reading List/the library website.
**Required Reading**

In preparation for this seminar, please look for information about Václav Havel (ideally, before you read Miller’s play), and please search for press articles on *Seven Jewish Children* from 2009 (ideally, after you have read Churchill’s play). We will have a discussion of the controversy surrounding *Seven Jewish Children* based on your research.

[https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/crossc/ANW0935.1983.001/33:3?rgn=volume;view=image;q1=2++1983](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/crossc/ANW0935.1983.001/33:3?rgn=volume;view=image;q1=2++1983) [linked to VLE Reading List]


**Secondary Reading**

To complement your reading of Miller’s play, you may want to consult work on post-Communism and the postcolonial; see, for example, Cristina Sandru, ‘Postcolonial Postcommunism?’ In *What Postcolonial Theory Doesn’t Say*, eds. Anna Bernard, Ziad Elmarsafy and Stuart Murray, 156-176. London and New York: Routledge, 2015.


**Week 9 - Topographies of Latin American Poetry: The Strange Case of Gabriela Mistral and Octavio Paz (Nicoletta Asciuto)**

When Octavio Paz (1914-1998) met Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957) shortly after the end of World War II, the great Chilean poetess asked him to send her some of his poems. Paz obeyed, as any young poet would to his senior. Mistral’s comments on Paz’s poems followed shortly after: ‘I like your poems, though they are not at all what I feel. You could well be a European poet; for my taste, you are not telluric enough.’ Young Paz interpreted ‘telluric’ as having his ‘roots sunk deep into native American soil’ (Paz, Convergences, 221): he simply was not American enough for Mistral.

Indeed, Mistral is renowned for her poetry of the earth: a total celebration of Chile, of its landscapes, of its indomitable nature; Paz’s is rather one that absorbs other cultures, styles, and languages, a writing which is always wrestling with the idea of either being or facing the other. Interestingly, though, both Mistral and Paz were diplomats for a considerable part of their lives, and are still seen today to represent Latin America internationally, as they were both recipients of the Nobel Prize (Mistral in 1945, Paz in 1990). In this seminar, we will ponder issues of national identity, as well as transnationalism, cross-cultural exchanges, and translation.

**Required Reading**

Please read the following poems by Gabriela Mistral, in translation:
‘The Other’ (pp. 30-33)
‘The Woman Unburdened’ (pp. 46-49);
‘Chilean Earth’ (pp. 56-58)
‘The Little Box from Olinalá’ (pp. 66-68)
‘Caribbean Sea’ (pp. 98-99)
‘The Foreign Woman’ (p. 100)
‘My Mother’ (pp. 128-132)
*Poem of Chile* (pp. 137-142)

Please read the following poems by Octavio Paz, in translation:
‘Return’ (pp. 362-371)
‘Nomadic Gardens’ (pp. 400-403)
‘Basho An’ (pp. 486-489)
‘Example’ (pp. 488-489)
‘Place’ (pp. 582-583)
‘Pillars’ (pp. 608-613)
‘Central Park’ (pp. 578-581)
Topoems (pp. 333-339)
‘Interruptions from the West I, II, III, IV’ and ‘Himachal Pradesh I, II, III’ (pp. 220-228)


**Secondary Reading**


Week 10 – Nordic Cool: The Question of Aesthetics (Alexandra Kingston-Reese)

When we think about world literature, we often find ourselves preoccupied by political concerns and perplexed by ethical questions. But what about aesthetics? Despite these critical preferences, when we traverse the currents of world literary discourse across the 20th century, we find aesthetics evoked nonetheless: take, for example, Fredric Jameson’s ‘Third World’ aesthetics from the mid-1980s, or Ezra Pound’s modernist fascination with not only the haiku’s form, but its philosophy. Though these are aesthetics reducible to a geographic location, site specific we might say, they have also become global phenomena, cultivated by the high literati and captured in the kitsch of popular culture. In this seminar, we will consider the cool Nordic wave that has washed over art, culture, food, architecture, and lifestyle in our contemporary moment—from Nordic Noir to hygge—as epitomised in the literary world by Karl Ove Knausgaard’s six-part, literary-autobiographical project of ideas, My Struggle.

Thinking through the first novelistic instalment of this project, A Death in the Family (Norwegian 2009, English 2013), we will question how we place these aesthetic categories into a world literary conversation, and how drawing on the discourse of aesthetics helps art transcend geographic localities and make global connections. As we do, we will think through ideas of contemporary readership, politics of translation, and the literary marketplace—how are such aesthetics are translated, transmuted, and transformed?

Required Reading:
Please also read a range of online reviews of the novel, particularly those from James Wood (The New Yorker), Ben Lerner (London Review of Books), and Zadie Smith (The New York Review of Books), and the Post-45 Collective’s Slow Burn series on the novels: http://post45.research.yale.edu/2016/06/the-slow-burn-volume-2-an-introduction/.

Secondary Reading

There are also a number of very useful handbooks of, and companions to, aesthetics. These include the following, but more can be found in the library:


**Examples of Films to Inform Core Module Classes** (listed chronologically)

*Things Fall Apart* (1971) Dir. Hans Jürgen Pohland
*The Harder They Come* (1972) Dir. Perry Hazell
*Life and Debt* (2001) Dir. Stephanie Black
*Tsotsi* (2005) Dir. Gavin Hood
*East is East* (1999) Dir. Damien O'Donnell
Examples of Suggested Preliminary Reading (i.e. as module background)


Fanon, Frantz, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (1963)


Jayawardena, Kumari, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (1986)


McClintock, Anne, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995)


Morey, Peter and Yaqin, Amina, *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11* (2011)

Parker, Andrew et al. *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (1992)


