Colonialism and Imperialism in Literature

This course is an introduction to some interesting and exciting works by men and women about “race,” colonialism, and imperialism in English, from the middle ages to the present—although we will be concentrating on some early modern (pre-1800) and contemporary (post-1930) examples, rather than trying to cover everything. We will examine how literature serves in the making of modern racial identities, especially in conjunction with the history of European colonialism and imperialism. We will also trace the contribution of non-English (and non-European) writers to so-called “English” literature. There are no prerequisites for this course.

English 208L is a Women’s Studies approved course. As we will see, colonialism “on the ground” (that is, in practice) is often a highly sexualized matter, and the concept of “race” is a sexual-reproductive category. “Race” is as much about parentage, reproduction, and sex-appeal as it is about skin tint, facial features, and so on; and, like gender, it is a sexual-reproductive category with social and political consequences. One such consequence is that racism often takes sex and gender-related forms; and many narratives of “race” develop around stories of love, sex, or family.

As an introduction, this course has two aims: first, to sample the range of literary works (and some non-literary ones, such as films) that have sprung from colonial and imperial realities—realities that include the use of African slave labour in the new world and the conquest of the native inhabitants of the Americas by European invaders; and secondly, to develop a vocabulary for discussing a literature (“English” literature) born in part of colonial and imperial encounters.

“Colonialism” is the term used to describe the advent of permanent European settlement in areas of the world outside Europe, beginning soon after Columbus’s voyages and becoming widespread from the seventeenth century on. “Imperialism” refers to the political domination of nations by a foreign power (such as during the Roman empire). As it happens, areas that were extensively colonized often became part of European empires, although many territories were politically assimilated without colonization. For example, in 1944 both Canada (a heavily colonized country) and India (where relatively few Britons settled permanently) were member states of the British Empire.

These colonial and imperial “adventures” put the inhabitants of the world into new relations of global conflict after 1492, and one of the results was the emergence and elaboration of the modern, pseudo-scientific notion of “race.” Europeans knew for thousands of years, of course, that they had a different skin tint from some of the inhabitants of other regions, such as Africa. This did not lead to the idea that “colour” was essential to the identity of either individuals or groups. As we will see in the medieval work known as Mandeville’s Travels, religious differences between peoples were considered far more important than physical ones. “Race” in the modern sense of a biological essence did not exist during the middle ages or before—on the contrary, it is a modern construction that springs from the need for Europeans to justify their attempts to dominate and subdue other peoples and cultures. Of course, just because “race” is a construction does not
make it any less real or the racism it engenders any less violent than if "race" were a fact of nature.

How is "race" and racial identity constructed? One way it is constructed (and resisted) is in literature. Our study of the construction of "race" and racism will address: racial identity and issues of gender and sexuality, such as the racial beauty myth; imaginative geographies that project a civilized "here" and a barbaric "there"; and the appropriation of the voice of the "other." We will also consider the role of literary forms such as autobiography in the making of racial identity.

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Although I will regularly lecture, classes will also include a seminar component. This will give students an opportunity to discuss the texts we study with their own interests in mind, and give them practice in independent and active learning. For interested students, and as a resource for students choosing the presentation option, I have put links to some relevant web resources on the course web site (see below). Students should view the class as a bit of a workshop: my role, after introducing new texts, will be to facilitate discussion and act as a resource person.

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Office: Hagey Hall 257, ext. 2416
Office hours: 2:30-3:30 Tuesday and Thursday, or by appointment

Course Web Site: http://arts.uwaterloo.ca/ENGL/courses/engl2081

Required Texts:
- William Shakespeare, Othello (Signet)
- Aphra Behn, Oroonoko, The Rover, and Other Writings (Penguin)
- Olaudah Equiano, Narrative, in H. L. Gates, Jr., ed., Classic Slave Narratives (Mentor)
- Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God (Harper & Row)
- Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart (Anchor)
- Joy Kogawa, Obasan (Penguin)
- Thomson Highway, Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing (Fifth House)
- Jamaica Kincaid, Lucy (NAL)

Assignments: Attendance and active participation in class (10%); 2-page paper (10%); 3-page paper (20%); class presentation or mid-term (your choice = 20%); and a final examination (40%).

The 2-page paper is due in class on February 2. The 3-page paper is due in class on March 11. For those who choose to write it, the mid-term will be held on February 25. Papers must be typed and double-spaced; if using a word-processor, please use a laser printer, and do not use right justification. A page is 250 words. Papers must follow the format for citation and quotation laid out in the MLA Handbook. Papers late without prior permission may be penalized. Uncompleted assignments will be graded F-.

NOTE: Please keep a photocopy of any paper you submit, and never hand a paper in by sliding it under (or sticking it to) my office door.
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SYLLABUS

January 5: Introduction: “Race,” Colonialism, and Imperialism

I. Re-Mapping the Tradition (English Literature Before 1805)

January 7 & 12: The World According to Mandeville:
Mandeville’s Travels (selections on handout)

January 12, 14 & 19: The Other at Home:
William Shakespeare, Othello

January 21 & 26: The Romance of Empire:
Aphra Behn, Oroonoko

January 28: The Colour of Innocence:
Phillis Wheatley, selected poems (R = Reserve)
William Blake, selected poems (R)

February 2 & 4: Resisting “Primitives”:
Olaudah Equiano, Narrative (chapters 1-5, 10-12)
“Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance” (film--screening TBA)

II. The Empire Maps Back (Literature in English After 1930)

February 9 & 11: African-American Feminism:
Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman?” (R)
Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God

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February 23: African-American Feminism (cont.):
Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God
February 23 & 25 and March 2: Decolonizing Literature:
   Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart
   “Sammy and Rosie Get Laid” (film--screening TBA)

March 4: Re-Making Black Identities:
   Langston Hughes, selected poems (R)
   Public Enemy (music)

March 9, 11 & 16: Trauma, Memory, and Community:
   Joy Kogawa, Obasan

March 18 & 23: Post-Colonial and Post-Modern:
   Tomson Highway, Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing

March 25 & 30 and April 1: The Race for Art:
   Camie Kim, “They Speak Quickly” (R)
   Jamaica Kincaid, Lucy

April 6: Conclusion and Review

Note: There will also be some supplementary essays on reserve (in about two weeks time): while not part of our core curriculum, these essays provide important perspectives on the study of “race,” and will be touched on in my lectures. The essays should be read as follows: for Part I of the course (Re-Mapping the Tradition) please read Lawrence Wright, “One Drop of Blood” and Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Race”; and for Part II of the course (The Empire Maps Back) please read Salman Rushdie, “‘Commonwealth Literature’ Does Not Exist” and Paul Gilroy, “Nationalism, History, and Ethnic Absolutism.” Depending on student interest, we can also look at an essay or two by bell hooks or Trinh T. Minh-ha.