Race and English 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. As an introduction, 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 closely connected with issues of descent, family, and sexuality. "Race," in other words, 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. One consequence is that racism often takes gender- and sex-related forms; and many stories of "race" develop around love, sex, or family.

As an introduction, this course has two aims: first, to sample a range of literary works (and some non-literary ones, such as films) that deal with issues of race. These works spring, as we will discover, 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. This leads into our second aim, which is to develop a vocabulary for discussing a literature ("English" literature) born in part of colonial and imperial encounters.

Some Definitions:

"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 other 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 activities 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 of the world, 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 of 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 or the racism it engenders any less real than if “race” were a fact of nature.

How are “race” and racial identity constructed? One way “race” 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. 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: www.arts.uwaterloo.ca/ENGL/courses/engl2081

Office: Hagey Hall 257, ext. 2416
Office hours: 5:00-6:00 Wednesday and 2:30-3:30 Thursday, or by appointment

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)
Course Packet (available at the bookstore by the third week of classes)

Assignments: Attendance and active preparation for and participation in class discussions and exercises (10%); 2-page paper (10%); 3-page paper (20%); in-class midterm essay or 15-minute in-class presentation (limited to 10 groups of 2 students) on a relevant topic (your choice = 20%); and a final examination on the semester’s work consisting of three parts: an ID section and two essay questions (40%).

Students are required to prepare course readings AHEAD of the relevant classes. The 2-page paper is due in class on January 31. The 3-page paper is due in class on March 14. For those who choose to write it, the midterm will be held on February 26. Students will be able to sign up for class presentations, in groups of two, starting in the second week of classes; class presentations will be scheduled for dates starting February 12. Papers must be typed, double-spaced, and fastened with a staple (do not use plastic report folders or other fasteners or covers); if using a word-processor, laser print your paper and do not use right justification. A page is 250 words. Papers must follow the format laid out in the MLA Handbook, 5th ed. Papers late without prior permission may be penalized 2% per day. 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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(1) In a short story called “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins” by Jorge Luis Borges, a “certain Chinese encyclopaedia” is described: “On those remote pages it is written that animals are divided into (a) those that belong to the Emperor, (b) embalmed ones, (c) those that are trained, (d) suckling pigs, (e) mermaids, (f) fabulous ones, (g) stray dogs, (h) those that are included in this classification, (i) those that tremble as if they were mad, (j) innumerable ones, (k) those drawn with a very fine camel’s hair brush, (l) others, (m) those that have just broken a flower vase, (n) those that resemble flies from a distance.”

(2) Some early modern human wonders: