ENGL 322: Postcolonial Literatures of the Americas and the Caribbean

Dr. Archana Rampure
Thurs: 4-6:50
Office: HH 254
Phone: x 5667

Winter 2006
Office Hours: 2-3 Thurs
Class: RCH 206
Email: archana.rampure@utoronto.ca

Course Narrative

This course is an introduction to the postcolonial literatures of the Americas and the Caribbean. In thirteen weeks, we will be taking a whirlwind tour through the history of about half the world in the last five hundred years and across three continents. This is a monumental – not to say impossible – undertaking: and we will attempt it with the full knowledge of its impossibility. In fact, we will begin with an acknowledgement of the impossibility of this class precisely because the history of colonialism is a history of the many and varied attempts to bring “other” worlds into our own through the acquisition of exhaustive information about them. So while we will be reading a variety of writings from so-called “postcolonial” writers, we will also try to resist turning these texts into forms of “native informancy.” To constantly remind ourselves of the fact that we can only ever be travellers in far lands and distant histories, that our perspectives on many of these narratives must be and always can only be outsiders’ views, we will be juxtaposing our readings of “authentic” postcolonial texts with travel writing, in an attempt to understand how our sense of the rest of the world is always already constructed within the context of the world that we currently reside in. We will be examining all of these narratives with a critical eye, in an attempt to understand how these narratives collectively form a discourse within which people live their lives. We will apply a number of theoretical frameworks – feminist, Marxist and postcolonial, for instance – to both the forms within which “postcolonial” writers write and the forms within which they are written into history as we try to understand the underlying assumptions about the relationship between power and the history of colonialism and its aftermath as they are revealed through these texts. We will be looking at how race, class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity are plotted in the realm of the postcolonial in North and South America and the Caribbean. In particular, given our own position at the periphery of the world’s one remaining superpower we will also study how the US and Canada construct their own historic positions within the world. Ultimately, what we will attempt to arrive at through this class in a sense of how narratives of the nation and of national belonging are riven by the fictions of the postcolonial in the particular context of the “Americas” and the Caribbean. Do people willingly participate in the singular narrative of the triumphant nation-state that forms the bedrock of every postcolonial nation in the Americas and the Caribbean or do they resist such demands? Can they subvert this narrative? Do they want to subvert it? What are the structures – of power, of production, of labour, of sexuality, of paternity, of globalization, of religion, of tradition – that keep this discourse of the postcolonial nation-state in place? And of course, we will ask what it means to write “postcolonial” literatures at all....
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By the end of the class, you should have a reading knowledge of the history of the postcolonial Americas and the Caribbean, both from the perspective of the triumph of modernism and from the darker underside of postmodernist attempts to write back to the centre against the grain of triumphant nationalist histories. You will be able to identify the links between culturally constructed scripts of colonialism, anti-colonial resistance and the ways in which these scripts are themselves material products, fashioned in particular spaces and born of particular historical moments. You will also have a sense of the textures of life in particular spaces and particular historical moments, ranging from the United States during the Civil Rights protests in the 1960s to Antigua in the 1970s to Chile in the 1990s and Canada in the present.

Texts

Robert Young: Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction (text)

Sembene Ousmane: God’s Bits of Wood (novel)
Isabelle Allende: The Stories of Eva Luna (short story cycle)
Jamaica Kincaid: Annie John (novel)
Philip Roth: American Pastoral (novel)
Paul Theroux: The Old Patagonian Express (travel writing)
Laura Taylor: A Taste for Paprika (creative non-fiction)
Helen Fielding: Cause Celeb (novel)

2-3 short stories will be provided in class for you to read. Also note that we will be watching 2-3 films in class. If you miss the screening, you’ll still be expected to see them.

Assignments and Grading

Reading Journals: 20%
1 page “ink-sheds” are to be handed in at the end of every class, from class 2 to class 12; these are to be your reflections about the texts for the day. These reading journals are meant to help you keep track of your thoughts as you read and also to make sure that you have something to contribute to class discussion.

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Group Presentation: 20%
A group of 3-4 students will present each week – on either one of the books or one of the films – and then take questions from the class as a panel. You will have 20 minutes to take a position on the assigned text. The assignment is not to become a plot summary but is rather to be an exercise in critical thinking. My assessment will focus both on your performance and on your position’s originality and persuasiveness.

In-class Essay: 10%
You will write a very short, in-class essay, with no advance preparation.

Essay: 40%
Due at the end of the term, this 12-15 page essay should be your major critical project for this class. I will discuss my expectations and possible topics for the essay with you throughout the class but some options include writing a critical essay on a topic of your choice, or an introduction to one of the texts we read in this class or putting together a critical outline for an (imaginary) anthology of South American or Caribbean fiction.

Participation: 10%
Self explanatory. I do not mark attendance; however, it is truism to say that you cannot participate in a class that you are not in.

Contacting Me: Your best bet is to email me; I will be picking up messages left on voice mail but since I don’t live in K-W, this will not be the most timely manner of getting in touch with me. I will respond to all emails within 2 working days; if you haven’t heard back by then, please resend your message.

CLASS SCHEDULES:
ENGL 322: Postcolonial Literatures of the Americas and the Caribbean

Class 1: Jan 5: Introduction
film viewing: Bye Bye Brazil

Class 2: Jan 12: Postcolonialism: A Historical Introduction
Read Young, Part I: Concepts in History (pg 13 – 69)

Class 3: Jan 19: God’s Bits of Wood
Read Young, Part IV: The National Liberation Movements (pg 160 –180)
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Class 4: Jan 26: Annie John
Read Young: Part V: Women, Gender and Anti-Colonialism (pg 360 – 382)

Class 5: Feb 2: The Old Patagonian Express
Read Young: Part V: Edward Said and Colonial Discourse (pg 383 – 394)

Class 6: Feb 9: American Short Stories... to be provided in class: small selection of short fiction from writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Annie Proulx, Amy Tan or Ha Jin.

[reading week]: do please begin the Roth novel – it is a long but rewarding read!

Class 7: Feb 23: American Pastoral

Class 8: Mar 2: The Stories of Eva Luna
Read Young: Part IV: Latin America I (pg 193 – 203)

Class 9: Mar 9: film viewing: Life & Debt
Read Young: Part IV: Latin America II (pg 204 – 216)
[guest lecture: Katherine Verhagen]

Class 10: Mar 16: A Taste for Paprika
[guest lecture: Laura Taylor]

Class 11: Mar 23: Cause Celeb
Read Young: Epilogue: Tricontinentalism, for Transnational Social Justice (pg 427 – 429)

Class 12: Mar 30: film viewing: The Business of Fancydancing
[guest lecture: Rachel Beattie]

Class 13: Apr 5: Conclusions
Essays due in class.

Goodbye and thanks for all the fish!