Senior Seminars (EN480) in English 2019-2020

**Block 1: Critique/Post-critique (Goldberg)**

For decades, literary critique has been identified with acts of interpretation and the unearthing of a deeper meaning buried within literary texts. But recently, some literary scholars have begun to challenge the meaning-mining hermeneutics of suspicion that grounds critique. If this older model of literary criticism has “run out of steam,” as one prominent theorist has suggested, what comes next? “As literary critics,” write Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “we were trained to equate reading with interpretation: with assigning a meaning to a text or set of texts.” Against the “symptomatic reading” in which they were trained, Best and Marcus go on to articulate a project of “surface reading”—a practice that turns away from critique in favor of other strategies for making meaning out of literature: critical description; the materiality of the text; emotional responses to literature; a return to disciplinary questions of literary form.

In this senior seminar, we’ll discuss the practical and political stakes of how we read. As we launch into thesis writing, we’ll consider what it means to be a literary critic, and how to do critique in a moment some have dubbed “post-critical.” A variety of new strategies for reading literature have emerged in recent years—the descriptive turn, new formalism, computational criticism, new materialism, reparative reading. Our discussions of these and other critical and post-critical modes of reading will help us to think about the practice of literary criticism as we head into thesis writing. In addition, through a number of academic exercises geared toward thesis writing, we’ll collectively discuss and practice the habits of literary research and long-form writing, workshopping our own scholarly writing and reading critical essays for both content and form to tease apart the structure of the literary critical essay so that we can write our own long essays over the succeeding months. Literary critics and theorists we’ll read may include Bruno Latour, Ian Bogost, Rita Felski, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Heather Love, Mark McGurl, Sianne Ngai, and others.

**Blocks 5: Race and Gender in Medieval Romance (Evitt)**

Medieval Romance often performs white, cisgender narratives that camouflage more complex workings of race and gender. Students in this advanced seminar will consider how medieval constructions of race and gender interweave the biopolitical and sociocultural in the various subgenres of Middle English and Continental romance (chivalric and Arthurian narratives; chronicles and fabulous histories; narratives of national identity and empire; family and saints’ legends) to articulate systems of power. We’ll explore marginalized cultures and nation-building agendas, faux conversions to Islam, antisemitic blood libel narratives, animal-human hybrid bodies, gender-bending protagonists to understand how fantasy, monstrosity, and cannibalism can be deployed as narrative tools to create what Geraldine Heng describes as “strategic essentialisms . . . a structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences” (*The Invention of Race in the Middle Ages* 24, 27).

We’ll ground our discussions in the most recent critical work of medievalists who frame their readings of romance through critical race theory, post-colonial lenses, and gender theory: Geraldine Heng, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Heather Blorton, Sharon Kinoshita, R. Howard Bloch. We’ll contextualize their readings through Homi Bhabha’s and Judith Butler’s work to provide you with theoretical tools that will translate to more recent literature you’re reading. Primary reading possibilities include: Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain* (selections); Marie de France, *Lais* (selections); *Silence* (anon.); *The King of Tars* (anon.); *Richard Coer de Lyon* (anon.); *Sir Launfal* (anon.); the Gawain Poet, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales* (*Knight’s Tale, Franklin’s Tale, Prioress’s Tale, Man of Law’s Tale*); Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur* (selections). Course requirements include: a critical article response paper with class presentation; an annotated bibliography; a conference paper critical précis with class presentation; individual conferences and class discussion of your own senior thesis projects.
Block 1: Gender and the Gothic (Richman)

This course traces the rise of Gothic literature in Britain from the middle of the eighteenth century through the end of the Romantic era. Students will explore the genre’s abiding concerns with gender identity and supernatural phenomena in order to understand how Gothic works (fiction, poetry, drama) challenged and shaped conceptions of authority, morality, nature, sexuality, and aesthetic judgment in eighteenth-century society. Gothic texts by Coleridge, Keats, Lewis, Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, P.B. Shelley, Walpole, and Wollstonecraft may be read alongside central philosophical works of the Enlightenment and modern critical readings on gender, sexuality, and Gothic and Romantic literature.

Block 6: Narratives of Servitude (Islam)

What connects an enslaved woman in Antigua to an apprentice in Jamaica or to a South Asian indentured servant in Guiana? Who narrates the experiences of the slave or the servant and to what ends? In this course we will tackle some of these questions through sustained engagement with accounts of slavery and indentureship in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds. Focusing on the 19th to 21st centuries, we will study texts that allow us to understand the entangled histories of different kinds of labor practices. We will pay attention to the thematic continuities in narratives of servitude across time as well as to questions of form and genre—testimonial, journal, report, and novel. As we direct our attention to contemporary literary productions that self-consciously engage with the histories of slavery and indentureship, we will examine the ways in which they creatively reimagine and reclaim the voices of the marginalized. We will also have occasion to engage with fiction and critical scholarship on contemporary modes and conditions of global labor migration. Throughout this course we will, as a class, reflect collectively on the recuperative function of literature, its relationship to history and the ways in which the texts under study compel us to revisit our ideas of freedom and servitude.