

# **ENG 400 Research Seminar Descriptions**

## **Summer/Fall 2015**

### **WCU Department of English**

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#### **SUMMER I**

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##### **Chris Kwame Awuyah—Folklore in African Literature**

In this course we will examine the presence and relative importance of folklore elements of content (e.g. themes, beliefs) and form (e.g. narrative style, songs, proverbs) in selected African literary works. We will also undertake a comparative analysis of folklore in selected African and African Diaspora writing.

In general, much of modern African writing involves an attempt to reclaim and redefine black experience in response to European domination. As Chinweizu and Ngugi note, European cultural hegemony has obscured and distorted black experience. Thus many African writers share a commitment to celebrate, in Achebe's words, "the philosophy ... depth, value and beauty" of the indigenous tradition. The writers tap into the traditional culture to show that before the advent of Europeans, Africans "had poetry; above all they had dignity" (Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*). The authors give expression to indigenous cultural forms which have been denigrated by the West. In form, and content, the writers give expressions to codes of aesthetics from the local culture. Some of the primary texts for the course deal with African experience prior to the colonial encounter (*Sundiata; Mwindo Epic; Gassire's Lute*) or the African phenomenon free from the fetters of the European presence (Beiers). The post-colonial narratives, selected for the course, rely mostly on indigenous folkloric forms and structure for poetics. We will also adopt postcolonial criticism as a framework for interpreting and evaluating the primary works. This approach will enable us view the texts as cultural constructs reflecting the attempt of each writer to create a counter discourse. Post colonial scholars such as Franz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, and Abdul JanMohamed call for tapping into indigenous cultural roots in opposition to Western Cultural imperialism

We will also focus on the emergence of black female consciousness based on the positions of Bell Hooks and Barbara Smith. These scholars call for a development of a black feminist consciousness since the broad based political movements that provide the context for black aesthetic limit the perspectives of the black woman.

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#### **SUMMER II**

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##### **Christopher Merkner—The American Short Story in the 21st Century: Forms, Theories, Applications**

Few forms of creative prose writing can claim the sort of complex and robust transformations the American short story has enjoyed in the past fifteen years, and this seminar will ask students to explore and study the form of the short story as we encounter it today. The course will open by studying the present manifestations of the short story and placing these against the short story's origins in early American print and magazine cultures; the course will then trace the trajectories of the form as they carry into the complex print and electronic media we experience

today. Throughout the semester, students will be asked to engage this exciting literary form in critical and creative writing.

Guiding this course will be these two fundamental questions:

What is happening to the Short Story in America today?

What do these changes/permutations say about Americans, America, and American short creative prose?

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## FALL

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### **Amy Anderson—An Introduction Visual Rhetoric; or, Why What You See is Not What You Get**

Have you ever been struck by a photograph on the newspaper's front page or fascinated by how a story visually unfolds in a comic? This seminar will turn to the field of visual rhetoric to explore why images like these are so powerful and to help us think about the rhetorical strategies employed in their creation. We will start out by looking at some of the key theorists in the field and consider their arguments about how visuals make meaning in ways that are both similar to and different from texts. Then, we'll turn our critical lens on a variety of different genres of images, ranging from Byzantine icons to illuminated manuscripts, photographs, and graphic novels. We'll even have an in-class workshop led by Philadelphia graphic novelist JT Waldman, who will walk us through the design of his acclaimed graphic novel *Megillat Esther*. Along the way, you'll critique the images around you and try your hand at composing your own visual arguments.

### **Michael Burns—African American Rhetorics**

In this seminar, we will address the history and development of African American English (AAVE), its roles within and beyond black culture, and its relationships to black experiences in mainstream U.S. society. As a motivating theme, we will view the rhetorical practices of black Americans as expressions of culture and means of resistance to racial oppression in the U.S. The course will draw rhetorical frameworks from Western European and African Diasporic traditions (e.g., Aristotle, Asante, Jackson and Richardson), sociolinguistic theory (e.g., Smitherman, Rickford and Rickford), and sociocultural theory (e.g., Omi and Winant). Students will write three papers: two short 5-page papers and a 2500-3000 word research paper. The main goals of the course are to have students engage in rhetorical analysis and develop a more critical understanding of the role language has played in the black American Experience.

### **Juanita Comfort—African American Women's Essay Tradition**

This seminar focuses on African American women writers who have helped expand the scope of the essay genre—in its *literary, cultural, personal, contemplative, polemic, academic* and other variations—well beyond its privileged belletristic origins. This seminar gives special attention to works produced during and after the Civil Rights, Black Arts, and Black Power movements (mid-1960s forward). Authors who are well-known novelists, poets, playwrights, scholar-teachers, and political activists have found the essay to be a powerful vehicle for asserting their distinctive identities as black women. We will study the aesthetics, politics, and rhetorics of the genre from these authors' intellectual, cultural, and literary vantage points and against the historical backdrop of Eurocentric, masculinist essay traditions, using black feminism and womanism as our primary critical approaches. The course aims to inspire a deeper appreciation for the essay

genre itself while conveying deeper insight into discursive relations between marginalized and privileged groups.

### **Randall Cream—Memory, Magic, & Mapmaking: the Metaphysical Mystery Novels of Haruki Murakami**

This course asks its participants to engage with the recent work of contemporary Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami. Once considered a low-brow or cult writer, Murakami's gradual embrace by the academy presents us with a great chance to view a newcomer as we entertain questions of the literary canon. The course creates an environment to read his most challenging novels and work on projects relating his fiction to issues of current concern in English studies. The course is constructed to facilitate student work along three main paths: projects involving psychoanalytic theories and criticism; projects centered on issues of memory, loss, and identity; and (most especially) projects involving spatiality, maps and the making of maps. Self-motivated students can generate a project and a methodology of their choice that uses the work and the material of our class.

### **Kristine Ervin—Truth & Authenticity in Contemporary Creative Nonfiction**

This course will explore the slippery nature of the creative nonfiction genre, with its blurred and blurring boundaries; with its swirling questions surrounding Truth/truth, facts, memory, subjectivity, and aesthetics; and with its often implied contract with its readers. Students will engage with contemporary creative nonfiction texts (memoir and the personal essay) and with current scholarship regarding the central questions of the genre. Additionally, students will investigate the ways in which the postmodern perspective, with its attention to multiplicity and fragmentation, informs the genre's definitions and complexities. Along with exploring the subject of truth and authenticity through a formal research project, students will also practice in the art of writing creative nonfiction, thereby pushing the line of inquiry through multiple lenses to answer or to complicate the question: "What does truth in nonfiction mean and does it even matter?"

### **Spring Ulmer—African and African American Still Photography**

In this course we will study visual rhetoric and politics of representation in modern and contemporary African and African American still photography. As we analyze the photography of Gordon Parks, Carrie Mae Weems, Lyle Ashton Harris, Seydou Keita, Zwelethu Mthethwa, Lalla Essaydi, and Zanele Muholi, among others, we will consider to what extent these visual texts might comment upon or subvert racial identities and social hierarchies, what role the camera plays in protest movements, and whether one can ever dismantle the master's house with the master's tools. Reading Franz Fanon, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Okwui Enwezor, bell hooks, and Deborah Willis will provide a theoretical basis for our discussions on how slavery, colonialism, neocolonialism, and globalization has shaped the history of black photography. We will also familiarize ourselves with a variety of pan African, diasporic, cross-cultural, and national black arts' movements that have shaped black aesthetics and politics.

### **Timothy Ray—"What a Long, Strange Trip": The Literary, Rhetorical, and Cultural Dimensions of the Grateful Dead**

The Grateful Dead are one of the most iconic American rock and roll bands. Known for their constant touring, their four-hour concerts filled with extended jams, their tie-dyed and devoted "Deadhead" fans willing to travel hundreds of miles "on tour" with the band from city to city, their incorporation of all forms of American music (from folk to rock to bluegrass to gospel to jazz to blues to ragtime to country and western to psychedelia), their association with the "psychedelic '60s" and the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, their role in establishing the "jam band" and music festival scene of today, their pioneering efforts in recording and concert technology, their willingness to allow their fans to tape their shows for posterity's sake,

and their iconic “leader,” Jerry Garcia, the Grateful Dead epitomized “hippie” counterculture that sprung from San Francisco in the 1960s and created a multifaceted legacy. Their literary influence is great. Long associated with literary giant Ken Kesey (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, Sometimes a Great Notion*) and his Band of Merry Pranksters, the Grateful Dead served as the house band for the legendary “Acid Tests” of the early 1960s up and down the U.S. west coast and, as such, were a focal point in Thomas Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. Ideologically, they were heavily influenced by Theodore Sturgeon’s 1950s sci-fi classic *More than Human*. Their association with Kesey’s Merry Pranksters put them in direct contact with Neal Cassady, who served as the driver of the Pranksters’ legendary “Furthur” bus and as muse for Jack Kerouac’s character “Dean Moriarty” in his novel *On the Road* and, as Kerouac’s friend, served as an intermediary between the Beat culture and hippie culture. The band’s literary contributions are mostly the result of lyricist Robert Hunter, who was heavily influenced by classic literature, heroic epics, and rough-and-tumble westerns. The songwriting efforts of band member Bob Weir and lyricist John Perry Barlow further contributed to the western motifs the band was known for and also added Weir’s preference for Biblical motifs. The Grateful Dead have also been the inspiration for many pieces of fiction (*Tiger in a Trance, Growing Up Dead, Darkness Bids the Day Goodbye*, to name just a few). Elsewhere, Ben and Jerry’s named an ice cream flavor “Cherries Garcia” after the Dead’s lead guitar player, Delaware’s Dogfish Head Brewery created an “American Beauty” IPA this past year, and there’s even a Grateful Dead “Steal Your Face” Mendocino County Red wine, proving that the Grateful Dead have embedded themselves into the American cultural landscape. In 2015, the Grateful Dead will celebrate their 50th anniversary, and while the surviving members of the band have been engaged in both collaborative and separate musical acts since their last performances together as “The Dead” in 2002-05, rumors abound of a possible reunion tour, and the anniversary will be marked by the release of a documentary for which Martin Scorsese will serve as executive director. Academically, the Grateful Dead are the focus of an annual gathering of the Grateful Dead Scholars Caucus at the SW PCA/ACA conference in Albuquerque, NM, representing 30+ disciplines, and a stand-alone academic conference, “So Many Roads: The World in the Grateful Dead, A Conference & Symposium,” being held at San Jose State University in November 2014. The Grateful Dead even have their own channel on Sirius Satellite Radio and have spawned countless impresarios, including numerous jam bands and tribute bands. This course will explore all of the above and more.

### **Robert Fletcher—Introduction to Augmented Reality: The World as Palimpsest**

This seminar will serve as a theoretical and practical introduction to Augmented Reality (AR), a digital technology that turns the world into a palimpsest (layered text) for reading and writing. While we have been exposed to depictions of Augmented Reality through literature, TV and movies for many years, the emergence of mobile platforms such as the Apple iPhone, Android-based smartphones, and Google Glass have brought many of these seemingly futuristic ideas closer to becoming part of our everyday reality. This seminar will cover the theory and practice of AR, including both world-based and text-based augmentations. The first weeks will offer a brief theoretical introduction to AR, demonstrations, and discussion of various approaches to augmenting reality. Our critical perspectives on this topic will include digital media studies (Manovich), digital rhetoric (Lindhé), and digital literary studies (Borsuk). After this exploration of the range of AR experiences, participants will create and publish a small AR project of their choosing (e.g., a tour of a location, such as the West Chester campus, augmentation of a print text, creation of an AR game), either individually or in small groups. This “proof of concept” will serve as the basis for the seminar essay, which will situate the student’s AR project in the cultural and critical contexts. The AR technologies we use (Layar, Aurasma, perhaps others) will not involve any programming, and no prior experience with digital technology beyond a word processor and web browser will be assumed. Experience with image, sound, and video-editing software (Photoshop, iMovie, Garageband, etc.) will be helpful, but is not required.

### **Erin Hurt—The Phenomenon of Chica Lit**

This course contextualizes the literary genre of chica lit (Latina chick lit) within various literary, critical, and social movements. The protagonists of these novels are mostly upper-middle class, college-educated second-generation Latinas whose concerns about culture and identity matter as much, if not less, than love lives and careers. This representation of Latinidad differs from, and positions itself against, canonical Latina literature. To show students how this genre intervenes in the field of Latina literature, the course will examine literary works that focus on “conventional” themes such as social protest, poverty, immigration, and assimilation. The course will then move to the generic conventions of chick lit and chica lit. The course will end by reading chica lit novels alongside third wave feminism and postfeminism. Throughout the course, students will be asked to trace the ways in which literary Latinas define themselves and their culture, and the ways in which class and genre affect these representations.

### **Jeff Sommers—Reading History: The Boundaries of Nonfiction/Fiction/Poetry**

On the copyright page of William Kennedy’s 2002 historical novel *Roscoe*, the publisher notes: “This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.” The novel, however, includes Governor Al Smith and Legs Diamond, actual historical personages, as characters. Kennedy writes, in his Author’s Note: “This is a novel, not history. There was a political machine in Albany comparable to the one in this book, and some of the events here correspond to historical reality, and some characters here may seem to be real people. But I don’t do that sort of thing. These are all invented characters, the McCalls, the Fitzgibboneses, even Al Smith and Jack [Legs] Diamond; and their private lives are fictional. They might be better than their prototypes (if they have any), they might be worse; but I hope they and their book are true. As Roscoe points out, truth is in the details, even if you invent the details.” Author’s Notes that offer disclaimers about the contents of an historical novel are not at all unusual in contemporary historical fiction. The challenge presented to readers is how to answer the question: “When reading a book set in the past, how are readers supposed to know what to trust or believe?” Another way to phrase the question is “What is the boundary between nonfiction and fiction?” A naïve reader will accept the story as historical fact; a cynical reader will reject the story as entirely imaginary. Our goal in this seminar will be to devise more sophisticated reading strategies that acknowledge the statement “based on a true story” to be an authorial warning designed to influence our reading. By reading historical fiction, both short stories and novels, and historically-based poetry along with commentary by historians on their work and by literary critics on the literature, we will attempt to construct those sophisticated reading strategies.

### **Elizabeth Mahn Nollen—Serial Killers in Fiction, Film, and Popular Culture**

This seminar will focus on America’s obsession with—and avid consumption of—the figure of the serial killer. We will base many of our discussions on Brian Jarvis’s *Monsters Inc.: Serial Killers and Consumer Culture*, which draws fascinating parallels between Americans’ consumption of consumer goods and their consumption of “everything serial killer” including bestselling novels, blockbuster films, documentaries, television series, music, art, video games, and even murderabilia. In order to discover the reasons for this obsession—both the public’s and academe’s—we will read closely and analyze a variety of texts including films (*The Silence of the Lambs*, *Seven*, *From Hell*, *American Psycho*, and *Monster*), television series (*Dexter*), novels (*The Silence of the Lambs* and *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*), graphic novels (*My Friend Jeffrey*), and fictionalized biographies (*Zombie*). Students will analyze these primary texts after reading essays from a variety of critical perspectives including cultural, psychoanalytic, feminist, Marxist, and gender studies. Students will also read more “popular” sources like blogs, e-zine and e-newspaper articles and reviews, music lyrics, letters, and interviews in order to appreciate the breadth and depth of Americans’ obsession with serial killers. By the end of the course, students will have discovered the fascinating—and sometimes troubling--intersections between

consumer desire and monstrous violence as “the serial killer is unmasked as a gothic double of the serial consumer” (Jarvis).

### **Graham MacPhee—Reading James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in Post Colonial Context**

According to the young James Joyce, because the Irish were “condemned to express themselves in a language not their own ... they have stamped on it the mark of their own genius and compete for glory with the civilized nations. This is then called English Literature.” This class pursues Joyce’s humorous but perceptive observation and seeks to understand the apparent difficulties of his famous modernist novel by contextualizing it within Ireland’s “semi-colonial” relationship with the British Empire. Much of the course will center on readings of selected chapters of *Ulysses*, so that by the end of the class students will have covered around half of the novel. In addition, students will read a range of texts by other writers and political figures and by Joyce himself in order to contextualize readings from *Ulysses*. This class will explore how *Ulysses* works in dialogue with its cultural and political context, and how its formal strategies can be understood as responses to debates about Irish identity, the politics of nationalism and imperialism, and the questions these debates pose for representation. To illuminate this intertextuality, students will also look at a number of critical essays on Joyce and *Ulysses*.

The aim of this class is to introduce a key work in modernist Irish literary culture by providing a broader historical and critical framework for understanding it. The course will encourage students to examine how historical context expands the range of interpretation, rather than reducing literary works to a simple reflex of history. Thus, students will be asked to consider the extent to which a literary work might imagine Irish identities that both reflect the legacy of British colonialism in Ireland and exceed it. The seminar will also develop students’ skills in close reading, critical writing, and deepen their understanding and appreciation of literary modernism.

### **Ashley Patriarca—Intercultural Communications**

Intercultural communication is a topic of rapidly growing importance for individuals and organizations. Whether you plan to work for an international company or simply travel extensively, understanding how intercultural communication operates can be immensely helpful. In this course, we will assess how our own culture(s) and national identities shape and are shaped by verbal, nonverbal, and visual communications. Throughout the semester, we will balance theories of intercultural communication with analysis and practical applications. Furthermore, the readings for the course will be interdisciplinary: we will draw from rhetoric, professional and business writing, marketing, design, even psychology.