

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
GRADUATE COURSE  
DESCRIPTIONS**

**~ FALL 2021 ~**

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**ENG 501 – INTRODUCTION TO SCHOLARLY METHODS**

**PROF. JASON MAXWELL**

Mondays, 9:10 – 11:50

Registration Numbers: (A) 14076 (B) 15804

This course is a requirement for new students to the Master's Program in English, while it is also open to doctoral students who have obtained the prior permission of the instructor. The aim of the course is to assist students in making the transition to the kinds of practical work, methodological reflection, and critical thinking central to graduate study. To this end, the course will introduce students to some of the institutional relationships and social dynamics that have helped determine the present state of literary and cultural studies, with particular emphasis on the development of the discipline of English in the modern era. The syllabus will draw on both foundational works and more recent critical writing, as a way to sketch the history of antagonisms and continuities, over-loud controversies and unspoken alliances that leads to our present moment.

The course will offer some pointers on methods of researching and presenting a piece of academic writing; some instruction in techniques related to using libraries, special collections, archives, and electronic repositories, for the purpose of discovering and accessing information ; and some technical knowledge about the production, circulation, and storage of texts that bears strongly on how one might establish evidence, assess claims, and understand motivation in the transmission of information.

This course is divided into A and B sections, which have different formats: the A section is a seminar, whereas the B section is a three-credit-hour placeholder designed to provide full-time status to first-semester Master's students. New students in the M.A. program must enroll in the A section, and full-time students can also enroll in the B section. It is not mandatory, however, to enroll in the B section, as some students prefer to take an extensive seminar with those three-credit hours. If you have questions about enrollment options, please contact the Director of the Master's Program.

**Please note that neither the A nor the B section of this course counts toward the four intensive seminars required for the Master's degree.**

## **ENG 502 – INTRODUCTION TO CRITICAL THEORY**

**PROF. DAMIEN KEANE**

Tuesdays, 9:10 – 11:50

Registration Number: 14815

English 502 is a survey class designed to introduce you to twentieth-century literary (and film) criticism and cultural theory. Proceeding chronologically, we will discuss several of the major schools of thought including Russian formalism, historical materialism, structuralism, psychoanalysis, feminism, gender and race theory, deconstruction, media theory, new historicism, and cultural studies. We will focus on foundational concepts, interpretive methodologies, and poetic analyses. Throughout the course we will utilize an array of primary materials—literary texts, motion pictures, and popular music—to illustrate and illuminate the theoretical approaches in question. By the end of the class, you should be ready to utilize these theoretical approaches selectively as you undertake advanced graduate level study.

## **ENG 503 - DIGITAL COMMUNICATION**

**PROF. NIKOLAUS WASMOEN**

Mondays, 3:30 – 6:10

Registration Numbers: (A) 23711 (B) 23712

This course provides a practical and scholarly introduction to the fields of professional, technical, and digital communication. We will discuss research in professional and technical communication, particularly as the scholarship might be implemented in the workplace. The course will also explore theories and practices related to the design and composition of professional-technical genres including concepts of visual communication and rhetoric, user experience design, and multimodal composing. In addition to readings, experiments with a variety of tools, and discussion board assignments, students will create a final course portfolio covering a range of digital media and genres, which they are encouraged to tailor to their individual disciplinary and professional fields in consultation with the instructor.

ENG 503 is a required course for the Certificate in Professional Writing and Digital Communication, more information about which can be found at <https://www.buffalo.edu/cas/english/graduate/certificate-in-professional-writing-and-digital-communication.html>.

## ENG 583 – The Poetics of Abstraction: Necessity, Violence, Promise

**PROF. JUDITH GOLDMAN**

Tuesdays, 3:30 – 6:10

Registration Numbers: (A) 23715 (B) 23716

There is nothing new about the thesis that the Absolute is identical to this world.

-- Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*

This course will explore a constellation of genres and processes of abstraction, on the premise that because abstractions, their concretions, and their fallout have formed the matrix of our disastrous present, the abstract, abstracted, and abstractive, we must understand them to live alongside-within calamity and perhaps to begin on a path out of it. If abstraction may be an unconditional dimension of human thought, how and why are abstractions made exactly (and with what awareness), by whom, in what does their currency and authority inhere, what are their modes of operation, what are their effects? Part of our study will involve meta-inquiry into how abstraction is discussed: focus on fundamental abstractions, such as word, number, and value, seems to invite speculative stories of origin, along with projections of human natural essences and archaic (and contemporary) primitivity. How do texts about abstraction not only “explain” it, but also build the reality of abstraction’s consequence? Relatedly, throughout the course, with each topic, we will read poets invested in in desublimating abstraction, producing work whose aesthetics defy or test abstraction and at times unmask its violences. Yet, as we will see, many poets exhibit a fascination with abstraction – in probing its necessity and inevitability, its esemplastic power to contain contradiction.

We will begin by considering the epistemology and ontology (?) of number, the (embodied) activities of counting and computation, and the cultural specificity of numbers as semiotic systems. We will also study the representation of number in writing systems, the various guises and uses of zero – including as meta-semiotic, self-referential tool; more metaphorically (or perhaps not) we will begin to take up art’s means of representing negativity, silence, and void. From here, we begin inquiry into economic abstraction, studying Marx’s account of the process of capitalization via abstract labor, while in turn we will take creative labor as a potential foil to labor’s abstraction, examining contemporary art and poetry’s demystification, deconstruction, and exploration of the potential promise of *poiesis*. We will then consider theories of value and money itself in its many functions, forms, and cultures, alongside the “numismatic” imagination: the basic tropic dynamics and logics of signifying systems. As we examine the contemporary monetization of everything and financialization’s abstractions, we will seek to understand these as grounded in racial capitalism through, for instance, accounting innovations running from the plantation formation to neoliberal social bond schemes, and as entangled with racial capital established in part through abstractive legal fictions of personhood, un-personing, and gradated sovereignty. We will also discuss capital’s shifting regimes of spatial and temporal abstraction, focusing, for instance, on the ruinous consequences of rationalization for indigenous cultures and on variation in world modernities.

From here we will turn to language as vehicle of conceptual abstraction, in part through Enlightenment (and contemporary) fantasies of universal and perfect languages, alongside theories of language's irreducible figurality and performativity. We will continue study of written systems' abstractive tendencies through examining writing v. orality, alphabets/phonetics/orthography, and punctuation. We will then consider the political economy of translation as well as translatability – the fungibility of one language to another, moving on to focus on deixis in language, that most abstract pronoun “I,” the time of language and its relation to (un)death, epitaphic discourse, and apostrophe (another mode of person-making). Our last meetings will focus on Conceptual art and writing in relation to many forms of abstraction, as well as on the sometimes subtly paradoxical relation of abstract visual and verbal art to materiality and radicalized.

**ENG 606 – NATIONALISM AND MEDIEVAL BRITAIN  
(STUDIES IN THE MIDDLE AGES)**

**PROF. RANDY SCHIFF**

Wednesdays, 12:30

Registration Numbers: (A) 23717 (B) 23718

As recent, heatedly contested debates concerning Brexit and Scottish independence make clear, multiple modes of nationalism circulate within the modern British nation-state. The principle strains of nationalism competing directly with British identity (namely, English, Scottish, and Welsh) often invoke deep ethnic, regional, and historical roots. Our course will survey both general theories of nationalism and particular brands of nationalism attached to Britain, while setting medieval literary works in direct dialogue with current theories of nation, empire, and literary history. Our course will feature literary texts (mostly in translation) that allow us to conceive Britain as a whole, while also exploring the French, Welsh, Scottish, English, Cornish, and Manx identities that all circulated within premodern Britain. We will engage with seminal theories of nationalism that address its temporality (e.g., Anderson; Gellner; Smith; Spivak), and we will discuss influential studies of British and intro-British nationalisms (e.g., Cocks; Colley; Davies, Kumar; Nairn). We will also explore key medievalist work on race, geography, and nation (e.g., Cohen; Davis; Heng; Ingham; Lavezzo). Our theoretical investigations will be coupled with a survey of literary texts that are often invoked—but which sometimes resist—nationalist agendas. Our first major literary text will be Geoffrey of Monmouth's seminal *History of the Kings of Britain*, which launched King Arthur as a fraught figure of British empire within a multicultural, multilingual Britain whose competing ethnicities and regions were unified by the myth anchoring them in the Trojan diaspora. We will then turn to Marie de France, whose *Lais* and other works will allow us to think through both the elite status of French and the oral culture of Continental Celts within medieval Britain. We will turn to considering Wales via *The Mabinogion*, which combines seemingly archaic Celtic myth with local variations of courtly romance. Finally, we turn to a number of Gawain romances to think through both English and Scottish empire, the volatile Anglo-Scottish border, and the interplay between imperial centers and marginalized regions (which could be potential nations): we will explore some Middle English and Middle Scots Gawain romances (available in freely accessible critical editions

online), as well as the Middle English masterpiece *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (which students may read in translation or in Middle English). All students taking the course will make one formal seminar presentation; students taking the course intensively will write a seminar paper of 15-20 pages.

## ENG 649 – BLACK AND RED

**PROF. JAMES HOLSTUN**

Tuesdays, 12:30 -3:10

Registration Numbers: (A) 23719 (B) 37920

We'll read and talk about the Black socialist tradition, from the late nineteenth century to the present: both literature and theory—with a continuing lit-crit focus on the genres and rhetoric of all these writings.

Four up-front oddities:

- With some notable exceptions, this topic might do double duty for a survey of Afro-American literature as such—and yet Black socialism remains somewhat below the threshold of visibility. Why's that?
- Ostensible leftists sometimes reject discussions of race as a descent into “identity politics,” as if there weren't a long and distinguished Black meditation on race and class in theory, poetry, and narrative—including in the *Combahee River Collective Statement*, which christened “identity politics” as part of socialist internationalism. And why do marxist theorists still overlook the enormous theoretical achievement of Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America*?
- One of the great American proletarian novels, Alice Childress's *Like One of the Family*, is seldom called a proletarian novel, was published at a distinctly inauspicious time for such things (1956), and is seldom read today. Where's Alice?
- Will the Revolution begin in Dixie? so it seemed before Reconstruction was crushed, and again in the Depression—as we will see in the Alabama narratives of Hosea Hudson and Nate Shaw, Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* (his brilliant collection of Deep South novellas), and Robin D. G. Kelley's *Hammer and Hoe*. And what about Mayor Chokwe Lumumba's *Cooperation Jackson* in contemporary Mississippi (*Jackson Rising*)?

Some other books and topics we'll read, excerpt, and discuss:

- Marx on slavery and the Civil War.
- T. Thomas Fortune, *Black and White* and socialist theory in the 1880s.
- Langston Hughes and Red Harlem.
- The Black proletarian novel: William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge*, Arna Bontemps' *Black Thunder*, and Ann Petry's *The Street*.
- Explanatory Power: Idealism, ideology critique, and historical materialism in contemporary theories of Afro-America.

- Angela Davis on *Women, Race, and Class*, and the Combahee River Collective on social reproduction (gender, race, class, and the future).
- The Afro-Caribbean-American view on class struggle in the US: Claudia Jones, Hubert Harrison, and C. L. R. James.
- Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*.
- Black and White and Red All Over: (economically) Radical Reconstruction, the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (the original STFU), and the first Rainbow Coalition (Fred Hampton and the Chicago Panthers, the Young Lords, and the Young Patriots).
- *Assata Shakur: An Autobiography*.

Everybody will write weekly semiformal essays (half an hour's work or so); those enrolling "intensively" will also write a 6000-word paper. I'll make the reading list more concrete and manageable over the summer, but that'll give you a sense of what we'll be up to. Write me in August for a more reasonable reading list and some links to inexpensive books. I'm happy to Zoom or email with you about the course: [jamesholstun@hotmail.com](mailto:jamesholstun@hotmail.com).

## **ENG 653 – POLITICS AND POSTPOLITICS**

**PROF. CHAD LAVIN**

Mondays, 12:30 – 3:10

Registration Numbers: (A) 23721 (B) 23722

Among the various "posts" pervading academic discourse (e.g., postmodern, postcolonial, postmarxist, even postpostmodern...), "postpolitical" stands out – in part because few seem willing to accept the label. Recent rises in authoritarianism, populism, and polarization certainly raise questions about the earlier charges of a neoliberal march into a postpolitical era, though they do little to address the past century's charges, starting with Carl Schmitt, that 20<sup>th</sup> Century liberalism was denigrating the value of politics. Ironically or consequently, these critiques of postpolitics emerged just as bumper stickers reminded us that "the personal is political," and as critics of varying stripes were politicizing various differences that had too often been trivialized as "merely cultural." By the end of the century, it seemed that depending on where one looked, everything was political and nothing was.

This class will explore what is at stake in the politicizations and depoliticizations that are taken to task in the literature of postpolitics. Doing so will require thinking about not only the nature of politics, but also the enduring status of a host of familiar distinctions: public/private, individual/collective, ideal/material, human/nonhuman, citizen/consumer, liberal/neoliberal, to name just a few. It will also require thinking about the relationship of academic writing to real political urgencies surrounding global capitalism, environmental collapse, and social justice.

Assignments will include regular response papers and a final paper. Readings will come from Judith Butler, Wendy Brown, Hannah Arendt, Simon Critchley, Jodi Dean, John McGowan, Amy Allen, and others.

## **ENG 706 – PUBLICATION WORKSHOP**

**PROF. DAVID ALFF**

Wednesdays, 3:30 – 6:10

Registration Number: 19266

In this workshop, students will rework a paper (typically a seminar paper) for publication. The workshop will help students to identify an appropriate journal for her or his work. It will then assist in the tailoring of the project for the format and focus of that publication. It will also offer guidance in the key characteristics of a successful submission. The workshop will feature several group meetings at the beginning of the semester and then regular consultations with the instructor for the remainder of the seminar.

**Note:** The workshop is open to 3<sup>rd</sup> year students only.

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