

Date: October 29, 2001
To: Grinnell-in-London Board
From: George Barlow
Re: Course Proposals for Grinnell-in-London, 2003

Below you will find proposals for three courses to be taught independently of the other GIL 2003 courses. These courses are revisions of the Phase I and Phase II courses I taught fall 1997 and reflect the knowledge I gained from that experience. There is, for example, much more to Black London than I could have imagined when I proposed the Black Atlantic course in 1995—more history and resources in the form of Black Londoners and books available in Britain and not in the U.S.—so I am now proposing a heavier emphasis on the culture of Black London, as opposed to the Britain/American balance I designed before. Also, for the Phase II course, English 295: The Contemporary Poetry Scene in London, I am proposing more class visits by London poets and fewer field trips to poetry readings. I met quite a few talented poets in 1997 who are still living in London, and it is simply easier to invite them to the GIL site than to require our students to attend evening poetry readings, many of which begin at 8:00 p.m. at venues outside of central London. I hope that you will see these revisions as improvements on both content and pedagogy. Thank you for your consideration.

PHASE I

AMERICAN STUDIES 275: THE BLACK ATLANTIC: BLACK CULTURE IN BRITAIN AND AMERICA

Prerequisite: American Studies 130 4 credits

Description and Objectives

This course will be a comparative examination of the black cultures of Britain and America with emphasis on Black London. British sociologist Paul Gilroy and a growing number of investigators of black culture argue that there is a culture that is not specifically African, American, Caribbean, or British, but all of these at once, a black Atlantic culture whose themes and techniques transcend ethnicity and nationality to produce something new. Black London, perhaps more than black New York, is the ideal setting for this kind of examination. "Black Britain," Gilroy reminds us, "defines itself crucially as part of a diaspora. Its unique cultures draw inspiration from those developed by black populations elsewhere. In particular, the culture and politics of black America and the Caribbean have become raw material for creative processes which redefine what it means to be black, adapting it to distinctively British experiences and meanings. Black culture is actively made and re-made."

It is hoped that students will leave this course with a greater appreciation of the history and complexity of black cultural practice on both sides of the Atlantic, and will begin to challenge the ethnic absolutism in contemporary thought with their London experience and understanding of a cross-fertilization and cultural hybridity which is both very new and very old.

We will begin with a two-week introduction and overview of the first eras of significant black settlement in 18th-century Britain. We will compare and contrast slavery and the anti-slavery movements in both the United States and Britain, and explore the African "continuum" in the New World and relate this to notions of "identification," "legacy" and "heritage" both in modern Britain and modern America. We will visit black public spaces in the Brixton area of London with these considerations in mind. Possible sites

might include shopping areas, like Electric Avenue, the Notting Hill Carnival, the Black Cultural Archives Museum, and the Museum of Mankind.

The next four weeks will include a field trip to the Transatlantic Slavery History Museum in Liverpool, and will be divided into equal units that will explore the following: (1) personal narratives by black Americans (DuBois, Robeson, Wright) who lived for a time in London; (2) notions of "Americanness" and "Englishness" and the precariousness of black citizenship in Britain and America via texts by Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall; (3) British soap operas (East Enders, Brookside Close, London Bridge) and black American TV sitcoms; (4) documentaries on Black Britain.

Weeks seven through ten will be devoted to a consideration of black music. Tricia Rose's Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America (1994), Michele Wallace's Black Popular Culture (1992), and the black music chapter ("Diaspora, Utopia, and the Critique of Capitalism") in Paul Gilroy's "There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack": The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation (1987) will be our primary texts for this unit. Students will be encouraged to do individual and group field studies in different parts of London, especially Brixton. The Commonwealth Institute hosts seasons of films, music, dance, and drama; it is open from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday to Saturday, 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday, and admission is free.

The last two weeks of the course will examine the function of icons in the black expressive cultures of Britain and America. We will focus on the rise to international prominence of Bob Marley in recent decades. Also, in these closing weeks, we will examine black newspapers in London—The Voice, Caribbean Times, and African Times—and the representation of black Britains and Americans in mainstream British newspapers and tabloids. Site visit: Bob Marley (1945-1981) Memorial in Dexter Square.

Evaluation

Regular classes will combine lectures, discussions, and guest presentations. There will be three 3-5 page writing assignments based on assigned readings and site visits, in-class group presentations, and a final exam. Students will also create a collective journal, detailing their various field experiences.

Texts (Readings will be drawn from among the following works.)

Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, Black London: Life Before Emancipation (1995).

Paul Gilroy, There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack": The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation (1987).

Paul Gilroy, Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures (1993).

Michele Wallace and Gina Dent, eds., Black Popular Culture (1992).

Tricia Rose, Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America (1994).

Peter Fryer, Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain (1984).

S.I. Martin, Incomparable World (1996).

Zadie Smith, White Teeth (2000).

Bernardine Evaristo, Lara (1997).

PHASE I

ENGLISH 395: LONDON IN THE LITERATURE OF THE COMMONWEALTH

Prerequisite: English 223, 224, 225, 227, 228, or 229

4 credits

Description and Objectives

In an autobiographical essay entitled "On Seeing England for the First Time," Antiguan author Jamaica Kincaid engages one of the most sinister sides of imperialism—the way it promotes the ruling nation's culture and rejects the colony's. England and all things English invaded every aspect of her daily life and education. Yet it was not until adulthood that she finally journeyed to England and really saw it for the first time. The real England she encounters is far different from the idealized England, whose maps and history she was made to memorize as a schoolgirl in Antigua. This course will examine the way London—the heart of the empire—functions as a setting for novels, poems, plays and essays by colonial and post-colonial writers, most specifically writers whose roots are in Asia, Africa, or the Caribbean.

Our students have the opportunity each year to study post-colonial literature in English courses offered on the Grinnell College campus, so this course should not be regarded as an introduction to, or comprehensive overview of, post-colonial literature. Instead, it will be a literary exploration of "place" as much as anything else. How does London look from different angles of vision, different world views? How does the lens change if one has immigrated to London from Lagos or Kingston? How does London look to a "Nigerian" born in and raised in London's Brixton district? We will read the assigned texts as individual and collective challenges to conservative white Britain's view of post-colonial peoples as a "problem" and "historyless," and we will attempt to understand the handling of London as "home" in the literature of the commonwealth.

Weeks one and two of the course will be an introduction to the incredible cultural diversity of London. This will be accomplished through readings on the building of the British Empire and its acquisition of territories in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. Following this will be an overview of immigration patterns in the 19th and 20th centuries, the broadening ethnicity of London. Early immersion in London's various "ethnic" districts (e.g. Chinatown, Brixton, and Southall) is essential to the success of this course, so students will be encouraged to visit museums, such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, which contains a large collection of Chinese antiquities (as does the British Museum), shops, and restaurants.

We will read and discuss novels by three Asian writers in weeks three through six—Timothy Mo, Kamala Markandaya, and Atima Srivastava. Mo's Sour Sweet (1982) is a tragi-comic tale set in London in the 1960s, following Mr. Chen, a Chinese waiter, and his family, as they start out in their own take-out business. But Mrs. Chen still finds it impossible to understand the British way of life, and Mr. Chen cannot escape from his entanglement with the Triads. We will also use the feature film of the same name which was released in 1988. In Markandaya's The Nowhere Man (1973), Srinivas, a Brahmin Hindu, leaves India in the 1920s to settle in London after his family's involvement in Nationalist politics has blighted his career prospects there. He sets up a spice importing business, but following the death of his wife soon afterwards, he feels lonely and adrift. His life perks up when he takes up with an Englishwoman of his own age, and she moves into his South London home, but their relationship develops against the backdrop of growing racial tensions in 1960s Britain. Srivastava's Transmission (1992) will spring us dramatically back into contemporary London and some of the most compelling issues of our modern age. Angellie, the protagonist, is an Asian woman fresh out of college and discovering the moral dilemmas to be faced in her job as a researcher for a TV documentary about AIDS. The story switches between her home-life and her Hindu parents in North London and life in the fast lane

in the TV business. A strong storyline, in which Angellie falls for a man who is HIV-positive, plus a strong feel of life in modern London, together make this a book well-suited to the aims of this course.

We will next turn our attention to the African and Caribbean experience in weeks seven through ten. Early black settlements in London were connected to the trans-Atlantic slave trade (mid-17th c. to the late 18th c.). The Black population of Britain in the 18th c., which was predominantly male, is unlikely to have been more than 10,000 strong at any one time, and was probably smaller than that during most of this period. The majority lived in London. The effective end of slavery in Britain in the late 18th c. marked the end of black immigration for about a century—excepting only the small numbers of black loyalists who returned to Britain after fighting in the American Revolution and the black seamen who settled here after service in the Napoleonic Wars.

The forerunners of the modern era of black were the Caribbeans, and to a lesser extent, the West Africans, who came to Britain during World War II. The 1950s and early 1960s was the most significant era of mass immigration to Britain. There has been little immigration from the Caribbean since the 1960s, but immigration from Africa picked up again in the late 1980s, as Somalians and Ethiopians fled from civil war in East Africa, and as West African immigration increased again. Today there are about 700,000 black people in Britain, of whom about 425,000 live in London.

For this unit we will read a range of poems by African and Caribbean poets and two novels, Buchi Emecheta's Second Class Citizen (1975) and Bernardine Evaristós Lara (1997). The young, ambitious Nigerian woman in Emecheta's novel leaves a good job in Lagos to join her husband, who is studying in London. Britain, "the land of her dreams," proves rather different from her imaginings, and her lazy, chauvinistic husband doesn't make life any easier. Lara is a poetic novel that traces two disparate families through many generations to one girl child. It is a rich but painful heritage: of proud Yorubas enslaved in Brazil, free in Nigeria and hopeful in England; of Irish Catholics leaving generations of poverty behind them, ascending to a rigid middle-class in England; and of the universal requirement to conform at all costs, in "the Motherland."

In the last two weeks of the course, we will continue site visits, take advantage of our proximity to the University of London (for student-to-student exchange and cultural events), and enjoy class visits by local black and Asian writers.

Evaluation

Regular classes will combine lectures, discussions, and group presentations (based on field work). There will be three 3-5 page critical essays and a final exam.

Texts

Jean Binta Breeze, On the Edge of an Island (1997).

Timothy Mo, Sour Sweet, (1982).

Kamala Markandaya, The Nowhere Man (1973).

Atima Srivastava, Transmissions (1992).

Buchi Emecheta, Second Class Citizen (1975).

Bernardine Evaristo, Lara (1997).

Benjamin Zephaniah, Propa Propoganda (1996).

Jackie Kay. The Adoption Papers (1991).

Class handouts.

PHASE II

ENGLISH 295: THE CONTEMPORARY POETRY SCENE IN LONDON

Prerequisite: English 120

4 credits

Description and Objectives

This five-week intensive course on contemporary British poetry is an elaboration of one of the most useful and enjoyable pedagogical tools in the literature and creative writing courses offered at Grinnell—classroom visits by published, practicing poets. Throughout the history of poetry in English (or any other language for that matter) the most talented poets have always attributed much of their inspiration and success to the personal contact they had and the individualized instruction they received from the contemporary poet(s) they admired most. Students in this course will be able to enjoy local British poets both in the intimate group setting of the classroom and at larger public readings and lectures.

Beyond increasing their knowledge of contemporary British poetry and improving their poetry writing skills, students will also learn about the maintenance and production of poetry as a whole. Field trips and site visits to some of the following places will enhance this endeavor: Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey, The University of London (readings, lectures), The Poetry Library (has the largest collection of 20th century poetry in Britain, as well as poetry magazines, audio and video recordings, and an information board where contests and workshops are posted).

Each student will be expected to interview one British poet in the five-week space of the course, and the class as a whole will organize a chapbook of these interviews. Samples of published interviews with British and American poets (gleaned from anthologies and literary magazines) will be provided, and will serve as models.

Evaluation

Reading and discussion of assigned poetry texts. Three or four original poems (written during the five-week course). One interview with a local British poet and participation in the arrangement of the course chapbook.

Texts (Readings will be drawn from among the following works.)

Maura Dooley, Making For Planet Alice (1997).

Moniza Alvi, The Country at My Shoulder (1993).

Linton Kwesi Johnson, Tings and Times (1991).

Michael Donaghy, Errata (1993).

Michael Hulse, et al., The New Poetry (1993).