CES 405 / ENGL 410
CULTURAL CRITICISM AND THEORY
FALL 2013
TODD 302, T/TH 2:50 – 4:05
CAPS: 3 credits

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Office hours: T 1:45 – 2:30
W 1:00 – 3:00
and by appointment

Required texts (available at bookstores and online)

We will also view some films and videos, and there may be handouts. You will be responsible for knowing all of these.

Course rationale
A course in cultural theory could exist in several departments: anthropology, sociology, music, psychology, philosophy, art, theater, English, communications, American Studies, gender studies, film and media studies, and of course culture studies. Because it exists in Comparative Ethnic Studies as well as English, we will examine racism as an impetus of cultural expressions.

The catalogue description stresses “colonialist and imperialist formations of culture.” What does this mean? The New Criticism of the middle of the twentieth century strategically extracted cultural productions from historical context, so that, for example, a poem could be examined entirely on its own merits, as if it had no author and no historical or social role. But the New Critics violated their own principles whenever they referred to Victorian fiction or modernist music—to assign works of culture to historical periods or to aesthetic “schools” is to contextualize them. But what do we tell readers who take books to the beach “just for fun” and who hate historical and social analysis? At the apparent opposite extreme, some critics seem to scrutinize restaurant menus for “hidden meanings” or for political biases. In Ethnic Studies, we commonly hear complaints that theory is irrelevant, that it feeds no one and is a mere indulgence of privileged intellectuals. How do we reconcile these apparently clashing positions?

Let us begin with two propositions:
1) Contextualization provides the best way to understand texts.
2) Theory provides the best tools for contextualizing.

Both claims are debatable, but for now let us apply them to the idea of “colonialist and imperialist formations of culture.” If we define oppressions such as racism and colonialism as the enforcement—through coercion or consent—of systemic and institutional inequalities, then, because the world in the last five hundred years has built the institutions that create inequalities, we can hardly afford to analyze any text as if it exists without a context. To what extent does the world created by Jane Austen recognize its racial and class privileges? How can we better appreciate James Joyce’s novels by understanding England’s oppression of the Irish? If, in a high school literature class, we were required to analyze the symbolism of the Mississippi River in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, did our teacher also discuss travel narratives, captivity narratives, and the ways in which racism infantilizes people of color?
Herein lies one of our problems: When we learn to read, we are not taught to contextualize. Our primary-school classes teach us the basics of vocabulary and sentences, then give us texts to read, usually books with stories about boys and girls who exist as if in a vacuum, with no histories—we do not read about refugees, disabled children, homeless children. In classes on “current events,” we learn only bullet-point basics that tell us what happened, when, how, and to whom, but not why. We learn to read, then, as if words on pages exist in their own universes, separate from “real life.” We read sequentially, one word following another, one sentence following another, and are not taught to wonder, for example, how the third paragraph of a text relates to the tenth paragraph, or how the first sentence in a long paragraph might help the last sentence frame an idea. If we are not taught to link non-adjacent different parts of a text, then how can we link a whole text to history? How can we contextualize? And yet, if we do not contextualize, we cannot possibly be good readers.

When we contextualize, there can be no “hidden meanings.” But without a knowledge of history and social relations, we cannot contextualize. There is no substitute for a knowledge of history. You cannot call yourself a film scholar if you know little about films made before the last twenty years. You cannot call yourself an ethnic studies scholar if your knowledge is limited to a single historical episode, such as the wartime imprisonment of Japanese Americans. Of course we cannot possibly know everything, nor must we. But we must learn as much as we can. Only then can we become truly good readers.

Methods
Close reading of texts: any cultural production, including written texts, visual or aural images, historical and/or “natural” phenomena, personal experience and observation, etc
Discussion and analysis of texts and contexts
Contextualization: situating a text in its historical moment, relating it to the present

Course description
This course will be heavy on reading, fairly light on writing. We will write three responses to readings, a proposal, and a paper of four to five pages.

We will start with Césaire’s short impassioned condemnation of colonialism and end with Eagleton’s bemused and wry study of what we might call “the culture of theory.” Most of our semester will be devoted to the thick anthology Cultural Theory: An Introduction. This is not the best reader in contemporary cultural theory—for that, you may want to check out Michael Ryan’s Cultural Studies: An Anthology (Blackwell, 2008)—but it is, in my view, the best historical survey. And that is what we will undertake this semester: a historical survey beginning with Marx and Arnold, moving through the Frankfort and Birmingham schools, into postcolonial and postmodernist writers, and passing into feminist, new Marxist, and “third world” writers. The categories are not exclusive, of course, and sometimes the most interesting aspects of a thinker’s ideas are those that straddle several “schools” of criticism. Given our historical mission, the text covers most of the major theorists—and the editors’ introductions nicely explain their inclusions—though a few names are regrettably missing, such as Michael Denning, E. San Juan Jr, Julia Kristeva, Gayatri Spivak, Arif Dirlik, and Mikhail Bakhtin.

Notes on reading and writing
On reading theory: In saying our reading will be heavy, I refer not to page count but to difficulty. This is, after all, a course in theory. We are not taught to read difficult texts, and so
when we struggle we blame the authors rather than ourselves or our third-grade curriculum. If you are one of those poor readers who, struggling with a text, simply stop reading—that is, if you justify giving up on a text by saying, “That woman is a bad writer, because I cannot understand her”—then you should probably drop this course. However, in saying that our texts are difficult, I do not mean they are unclear. Herein lies the critical lesson for starting this course: You must learn the difference between simplicity and clarity, which I will discuss below. For now, consider the trajectory of a theoretical essay as a series of ideas, rising and falling in significance, not all of them equally important, such as this:

A B C D E
  B1 B3 C1 E1 E2 E3

Frederic Jameson writes essays that sometimes develop like this. His thesis may appear in A or in E, and even though his subpoints B1 through B4 may be “side notes” only marginally relevant to the thesis, a full understanding of his argument depends on your recognizing the relationships among subpoints under B, C, and E, and the relationships between all those subpoints and the main points A through E. Note here that even though his thesis may appear in his opening section A, still the value of that section may be less than the values of B through E generally. To understand such a reading at least minimally, you need to understand the highest level of meaning, in this case B, C, D, and E (as well as A, if that is where the thesis is).

On reading and writing: Consider these sentences:
1) He was a big man.
2) His frame filled the doorway.
Obviously, Sentence 2 is better. Why? You may object that it does not exactly mean the same as Sentence 1, but that is only because 1 is ambiguous—unclear. What is the most important word in each sentence? You will probably choose “big” for 1 and “filled” for 2. Notice the functional difference: “big” is an adjective, a baggy and broad word with too many possible meanings, while “filled” is a verb—your early teachers would call it an “action verb”—with a particular meaning. Sentence 1 is simple, while Sentence 2 is clear. Sentence 1 may be closer to the way we talk, but Sentence 2 should be closer to the way we write—and read. Except perhaps for Césaire, none of our texts this semester will be simple. But most will be clear. Clear writing is sometimes easy, sometimes difficult. Among the writers we will read, only a few are truly bad writers. (I will name one here: Frederic Jameson, in his early work.)

Course requirements and objectives

Attendance and participation: Attendance is mandatory. After a third unexcused absence, each new unexcused absence will result in an automatic reduction of your course grade by a half-letter. Your participation is also required. Read the assignments. Bring your books to class. The aim is to discuss the issues, and you will be expected to contribute in some way.

Text presentation: You will lead the discussion of one text. This will involve your reading the assigned text, discussing an aspect of the text that you find significant (a theme, an issue, etc), and arguing that the text is or is not convincing. Because many of our texts will be difficult, you will not be expected to explicate every aspect of theory. In fact, you may find the entire text confusing and unclear—in which case you will devote your presentation to an explanation of why it is unclear.
**Response papers:** You will turn in three response papers, one for each book. Each of these should be 500 to 800 words—that is, roughly two or three typed pages—and should respond thoughtfully to designated reading assignments. These responses should indicate much more than merely whether you liked or disliked the text. Give more detail than just “I liked this chapter because it flowed well.” Engage both the material and the author’s response to it. These responses will be informal, but writing mechanics, organization, and logic will factor into their grade. No late responses will be accepted without prior clearance—this rule is absolute.

**Proposal:** You will write a proposal or abstract for a Call For Papers (CFP) on a topic related to our work. This CFP may come from a conference or a journal, but you must write it as if you plan to write the paper or presentation. Sample CFPs will be provided early in the semester. Details will be provided in an assignment sheet distributed fairly early in the semester.

**Paper:** You will write a final paper, due near the end of the semester. It should fill four to five pages and analyze an issue we discuss in class. You will need no research, though outside sources may be useful. The paper should be typed in a standard font, with standard margins and a title. Cite sources in the MLA reference style. A detailed assignment sheet will be distributed near the middle of the semester.

I will return graded assignments as soon as I can. Any work that you have not picked up or that, like the final paper, I have not returned will be destroyed at the end of December. Please request any unreturned materials before then.

**Extra credit:** The semester will bring to campus various events relevant to our work. I encourage you to attend these, and you will receive extra credit for writing brief responses (of 250 to 300 words). Do not merely summarize the event—that is, do not repeat the lecture or tell the story of the film—but identify its main points and explain their value (or lack of value).

Here is an outline of the grade distribution (on a 400-point scale):

- **Attendance and participation:** 10 percent, 40 points
- **Presentation:** 5 percent, 20 points
- **Response papers:** 30 percent (10 each), 120 points
- **Proposal:** 15 percent, 60 points
- **Paper:** 40 percent, 160 points

**Objectives:** Our immediate goal is to determine what cultural theorists of the past two centuries have concluded about the value and meaning of culture, and to engage—even if only to agree or disagree—with those conclusions. By the end of the semester, we should have developed or revised our own sense of the significance of culture. Further, we should more easily link the work of cultural production to the mission of social justice. In his poem “In Memory of W.B. Yeats,” W.H. Auden famously wrote that “poetry makes nothing happen,” yet following that line Auden observes Ireland’s social unrest and the looming world war, for which “All the dogs of Europe bark, / And the living nations wait, / Each sequestered in its hate.” Would we—should we—want to live in a world in which culture makes nothing happen? For that matter, could we live in such a world?

In his essay “On Language, Race, and the Black Writer,” James Baldwin argued: Writers are obliged, at some point, to realize that they are involved in a language which they must change. And for a black writer in this country to be born into the English language is to realize that the assumptions on which the language operates are his [sic] enemy.
Note that each of these two sentences constructs an opposition between writers and language. In the second sentence, black writers must recognize the guiding principles of English as inherently racist. But even in the more general first sentence, all writers must change language. For writers and readers, language can be a tool only when we work to improve it, to make it convey our meanings more clearly, to make it work for social justice.

**Academic integrity:** Though you may work with classmates to grasp the concepts in our course, still each of you must turn in original work. The university’s policies on cheating and academic integrity are available: <conduct.wsu.edu/academic-integrity-policies-and-resources>. You are responsible for knowing them. In general, in any work you submit, the source of every word, image, and idea must be easily attributable. Cite your sources. Failure to cite properly in graded writing will result in your failing the course.

**Students with Disabilities:** Reasonable accommodations are available for students with a documented disability. If you have a disability and need accommodations to fully participate in this class, please either visit or call the Access Center to schedule an appointment with an Access Advisor. All accommodations MUST be approved through the Access Center. Location: Washington Building 217; Phone: 509-335-3417.

**Campus Safety Plan/Emergency information:** In the interest of campus safety and emergency procedures, please become familiar with the information available on the following Web sites: [http://safetyplan.wsu.edu](http://safetyplan.wsu.edu) (Campus Safety Plan), [http://oem.wsu.edu/emergencies](http://oem.wsu.edu/emergencies) (Emergency management Web site), [http://alert.wsu.edu](http://alert.wsu.edu) (WSU Alert site).

**Schedule**

Please note that all assignments listed below are subject to change. You are responsible for keeping up with changes. Césaire and Eagleton are identified by authors’ names; *Cultural Theory* is identified as Reader.

8/20: Course introductions.
8/22: Read Césaire, pp 29-78.

8/27: Read Césaire, pp 7-28 (Robin Kelley) and Reader, pp 1-4 (Introduction).
8/29: Read Reader, pp 7-17 (Introduction and Arnold) and 40-52 (Horkheimer and Adorno).
FIRST RESPONSE PAPER DUE (on Césaire).

9/3: Read Reader, pp 53-59 (Williams) and 72-80 (Hall). Presentations begin.
9/5: Read Reader, pp 81-93 (Bourdieu).

9/10: Read Reader, pp 99-108 (Introduction and Marx) and 114-123 (Fanon).
9/12: Read Reader, pp 124-133 (Foucault) and 139-142 (Deleuze).

9/17: Read Reader, pp 143-149 (Hardt and Negri) and 155-171 (Introduction and Marx and Engels).
9/19: Read Reader, pp 172-187 (Lukács).
9/24: Read Reader, pp 188-203 (Gramsci) and 204-222 (Althusser).
9/26: Read Reader, pp 223-227 (Hall) and 228-244 (Žižek).

10/3: Read Reader, pp 249-263 (Introduction and Hebdige).

10/8: Read Reader, pp 264-273 (Michel de Certeau) and 274-281 (Anderson).
10/10: Read Reader, pp 282-295 (Appadurai) and 296-306 (Massey).

10/15: Read Reader, pp 307-317 (Harvey) and 318-331 (Davis).
10/17: Read Reader, pp 335-352 (Introduction and Foucault) and 353-356 (Williams).

10/22: Read Reader, pp 357-363 (Lyotard) and 376-390 (Jameson).
10/24: Read Reader, pp 415-431 (Introduction and Fanon).

10/29: Read Reader, pp 449-453 (Irigaray) and 454-471 (Haraway).
10/31: TBA. PROPOSAL DUE.

11/5: Read Reader, pp 472-491 (Butler).
11/7: Read Reader, pp 504-527 (Sedgwick).

11/12: Read Reader, pp 492-503 (Gilroy) and Eagleton, chapter 1.
11/14: Read Eagleton, chapter 2. SECOND RESPONSE PAPER DUE (on Reader).

11/19: Read Eagleton, chapters 3 and 4.
11/21: Read Eagleton, chapter 5.

12/3: Read Eagleton, chapters 6 and 7.
12/5: Read Eagleton, chapter 8 and Postscript. THIRD RESPONSE PAPER DUE (on Eagleton).

12/10: FINAL PAPER DUE in my office or mailbox by 4:00 PM.

Useful Web sites on culture and cultural theory