

Duke English Graduate  
Course Descriptions  
FALL 2024

**ENGLISH 590S-3.01** Special Topics Seminar III  
AMERICAN EPIC (and its Mythopoetics)  
**Thomas Ferraro**

“He thought the world’s heart beat at some terrible cost and that the world’s pain and its beauty moved in a relation of divergent equity and that in this headlong deficit the blood of multitudes might ultimately be exacted for the vision of a single flower.”

—Cormac McCarthy, of John Grady Cole

What happens when the genre of the “Romance,” which is the episodic novel of individual self-determination, goes epic? So that the story of *One Outsized Figure* turns out to embody the U.S. imperial will writ large, in its interrelatedly extractive-capitalist, entrepreneurial-capitalist, and finance-capitalist forms: the violence of men (and I do mean *males*) hell bent on conquest and dynasty and elimination of the Other (all the way, at times, to self-immolation)? What you get are the greatest stories of America ever told, ever absorbed and then re-imagined: Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, and Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*, interspersed to my designing mind with Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather* for its sardonic comedy (as per the often-hilarious *Moby-Dick!*), and with Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (an American *anti*-epic if ever there were one) for its view-from-below. Men assume that the story-stage is theirs alone—beginning, notoriously, with Melville—but interracial homosociality is only part of the larger story, as we tease out the erotic power, social complicity, and fugitive resistance of the women, too. Each of these books has proven uncannily, profoundly prophetic—in ways we are still catching up with, thanks to both Cultural Studies and its discontents. And while narrative complexity and plot satisfaction are keys to the less-episodic novels, in each one the prose-poetry (word by word, sentence by sentence) and/or the imagistic regimes (figure by figure, scene by scene) are sublime—Biblical and Homeric, Shakespearean and Dantean. No Midsummer Night’s Revel like that onboard the good ship Pequod (at spermaceti time!), whilst Hades Hath No Darker Wanderings than that of McCarthy’s Judge (self-elected, heinously) and Ellison’s Unseen Human (socially dead but brilliantly alt-alive).

Five long novels only, so we are going to go slow. As the course subtitle indicates, we will also take pointers (provocative excerpts, not books, which tend of epic length in themselves!) from the critics who have risen to the occasions of these novels and whose mythopoetics ought to be a revelation even—perhaps especially—to graduate students: Walt Whitman, D.H. Lawrence, W.C. Williams, Charles Olson, C.L.R. James, Charles Feidelson, Leslie A. Fiedler, Albert Murray (Ellison’s shadow editor), Fredric Jameson, Richard H. Brodhead, Toni Morrison, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Camille Paglia, Caleb Smith, Peter Coviello, and the writers of *The Sopranos*.

I have been told, by the way, that these novels can’t be taught anymore—too complex, too brutal, too contrary and knowing and wise. I am not ready to give up, and I am hoping you will take first a gander and then a risk, coming along for what promises to be a helluva ride.

## ENGLISH 590S-5.01 SPECIAL TOP SEMINAR DIVERSITY

### Corpses of Empires: Europe, Otherwise

Corina Stan

In this seminar we will read and analyze major philosophical and literary texts of the past century that explore the European self-understanding during and after the collapse of imperial projects and the exhaustion of (what philosophers have called) “Europe’s promise to the world.” We’ll begin by tracing the philosophical history of that promise in the work of Kant, Hegel, Marx, Husserl, Berlin, Derrida, Glendinning, and others, in parallel with exploring fictional texts and memoirs chronicling the disintegration of intra- and extra-continental empires. In so doing, we’ll engage critically with the metonymical use of “Europe” (as a substitute for the West) and examine the merits and limitations of comparisons between the historical situation of Eastern and Central Europe, on one hand, and that of colonized cultures in Africa and Asia, on the other. A thread throughout our discussions will be the role of intellectuals and literature in articulating historical responsibility, the work of collective memory, the possibility of reparations, and the value of human life after the bankruptcy of humanist ideals. The texts in the reading list below – by Romanian, Polish, Hungarian, German, Czech, Somali-Italian, Bulgarian, Israeli, Senegalese, Tanzanian-British, and Austrian/stateless writers – engage in layered meditations on history, typically spanning hundreds of years and multiple generations.

Reading list:

Mihail Sebastian, *For Two Thousand Years* (1934)

Witold Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke* (1937) and selections from *A Kind of Testament* (1968) & *Diary* (2012)

Sandor Márai, *Embers* (1942) and selections from *Memoir of Hungary (1944-1948)* (1972)

Gregor von Rezzori, *Memoirs of an Anti-Semite* (1979)

Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) and “The Death of Europe” (1984)

Jenny Erpenbeck, *The End of Days* (2014)

Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Afterlives* (2020)

Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, *The Most Secret Memory of Men* (2021) Igiaba Scego, *The Color Line* (2022)

David Grossman, *More than I Love My Life* (2021)

Georgi Gospodinov, *Time Shelter* (2021)

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## **ENGLISH 590S-5.02 SPECIAL TOP SEMINAR DIVERSITY**

### **Black Mobilities: Cartographies of Black Transnationalism and Diaspora**

**Jarvis McInnis**

This course examines cartographies of black transnational and diasporic mobility within African Diaspora literary and cultural studies. Loosely organized around overlapping cartographies—the

Black Atlantic, Circum-Caribbean & Hemispheric Migrations, European Sojourns, and African “Returns”—this course explores literature, criticism, and theories of black people on the move, from the coercive and fugitive movements of slavery, colonialism, and their afterlives to labor migration and practices of black cosmopolitanism. We will trace these routes of black mobility across a range of literary genres, including fiction, travel writing, memoir, and alongside theories of diaspora, transnationalism, internationalism, cosmopolitanism, and geography. Readings may include works by Martin Delany, Zora Neale Hurston, W. E. B. Du Bois, Claude McKay, Richard Wright, Maryse Condé, Erna Brodber, Saidiya Hartman, Yaa Gyasi, and Chimamanda Adichie, among others. Primary texts will be paired with secondary criticism and theoretical works by Paul Gilroy, Brent Edwards, Hortense Spillers, Michelle Ann Stephens, Tsitsi Jaji, Ifeoma Nwankwo, José Esteban Muñoz, Katherine McKittrick, Daphne Brooks, Samantha Pinto, and Achille Mbembe, among others. For the final assignment, students can choose to complete one of the following: 1) 15-page seminar paper 2) abstract and annotated bibliography 3) conference abstract, paper, and presentation 4) syllabus.

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## **ENGLISH 890S.01 SPECIAL TOP SEMINAR**

### **AI, SMARTNESS & LEARNING**

**Rob Mitchell**

#### **Artificial Intelligence, Smartness, and Narratives of Learning**

This is a media theory course, which aims to sharpen the question of the ontology of media by focusing on the implicit theories of *learning* that underwrite recent media theoretical work on “smart” technologies and artificial intelligence (e.g., the work of Louise Amoore, Benjamin Bratton, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Alexander Galloway, Kate Hayles, Yuk Hui, Adrian MacKenzie, Bernard Stiegler, and others). The “smartness” of smart technologies names the capacities of devices and techniques to learn, and the mechanism of this learning are various forms of artificial intelligence. But what kind of learning, specifically, is this? How does that mode (or modes) of learning relate to traditional accounts of learning, such as those of Locke, Rousseau, Dewey, and Skinner (and, more recently, Terrence Deacon), some of which have sought to account for both human and non-human

learning? What role do signs and semiotics play in both traditional theories of learning and in more recent accounts of smart, artificial intelligence-assisted learning, and what are the implications of these theories of semiotics for our understanding of the nature, or natures, of media? What relationship do these theories of machine learning bear to concepts of *critique* and *expertise*? What kinds of narratives structure these accounts of machine-assisted learning?

While this is a media theory-heavy course, we will anchor this theory in analysis of concrete instances of contemporary smart technologies and learning algorithms. Some cases will focus on specific technologies (e.g., ChatGPT; smart medicine applications); others will focus on architectural instantiations of smartness (e.g., smart cities); and others will focus on theoretical resonances (e.g., between the neoliberal theory of the market, often presented as a vast information processor, and theories of computer-assisted “deep learning”). While the first several case studies are written into the syllabus, the last several will be determined by student interests.

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**ENGLISH 890S-02 SPECIAL TOP SEMINAR CTM**  
**History of Contemporary Literary Criticism**  
**Rob Mitchell**

This course provides students with a concise historical and theoretical overview of university-based literary criticism, with the goal of enabling graduate students to understand better—and hence, situate their own projects within—the history of their discipline. We will focus on a number of key twentieth- and twenty-first century methodological orientations and movements, such as new criticism, structuralism, deconstruction, Foucauldian poststructuralism, feminism, postcolonial criticism, critical race studies, queer studies, and possibly a few others, depending on the direction(s) in which our conversations go. We will also consider how these movements relate to both the changing structure of the university and to non-university publics across this period. This course does not aim to provide a snapshot of the field at the current moment; rather, it provides a history of the developments that have led to the current state of the field.

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**ENGLISH 890T.01**  
**Dissertation Workshop**  
**Priscilla Wald**

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**ENGLISH 890T.01**  
**Job Market Workshop**  
**Jarvis McInnis**

## **Non-English courses that may be of interest to English Grad Students**

### **CINE 257S.01**

#### **American Cinema: Redefined**

**Franklin Cason Jr.**

American Cinema has been at once a popular entertainment, a major art form, a culture industry, and a basis for social and national identity. This course examines how films speak to the history of the nation as a whole. Hollywood is often conflated with "America," but this is imprecise when we consider the growing heterogeneity of domestic productions. Taking into account the diversity of American cinema and Hollywood's international dominance, we will explore how varieties of domestic film production develop in the shadow of the commercial film industry, how they differ from mainstream productions, and how they contribute to innovations. We will trace the evolution of American Cinema by considering how topics like ethnic cinema, independent cinema, political films, avant-garde, cultural identity, niche film markets, and progressive trends in filmmaking challenge mainstream patterns and conventions of reception and representation that regularly overlook marginalized communities and perspectives.

While not a historical survey or a film appreciation course of great "masterworks," screenings and examples will be inclusive and broad, pulling examples from across historical eras, styles, and genres. Whether challenging or entertaining, high art or popular culture, the examples will illustrate the nature and breadth of cinematic and cultural expression.

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### **HISTTHEO 890-01**

#### **Topics Historical Theology (Lecture)**

**Conversing with God**

**David Aers**

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