

Carleton University **TENTATIVE SYLLABUS**
Winter 2017
Department of English Language and Literature
and
PhD Program in Cultural Mediations

ENGL 5002 / CLMD 6903: Biopolitics, Sentimentality, and Humanitarian Reason

Time: Wednesdays @ 14:30–17:30
Location: 201D SP

Instructor: Professor Stuart J. Murray
Email: stuart.murray@carleton.ca
Twitter: @stuart_j_murray
Office: 1820 DT
Phone: 613-520-2600, ext. 2314
Office Hours: TBA and by appointment

“Now, as we know, there’s that great famous quote, ‘poetry makes nothing happen’—books don’t make things happen, but they make a few readers ... or maybe more than a few, I don’t know how many, feel not as alone in the world and in their predicaments.”

— Edna O’Brien

“For the first time, more than 60 million people cannot safely go home. That is 1 in every 113 people in the world. The number jumped from 59.5 million in 2014 to 65.3 million last year, according to a global trends report released Monday by the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees.”

— *The Washington Post*

“Humanitarian intervention is a biopolitics insofar as it sets up and manages refugee camps, establishes protected corridors in order to gain access to war casualties, develops statistical tools to measure malnutrition, and makes use of communication media to bear witness to injustice in the world.”

— Didier Fassin

Brief Course Description

This course addresses the rhetorics of humanitarianism, and the ways that humanitarian sentiments—the desire to address, redress, or alleviate human suffering—are fostered and mobilized as biopolitical forms of governance, the means by which the biopolitical State increasingly manages and regulates the lives of its populations, both at home and abroad. Where should we place literature and literary tropes in the context of humanitarianism and biopolitics?

Are literary sentiments complicitous—tools of neoliberal biopolitics? Or might they furnish us with critical tools? I hope to explore a distinctly rhetorical understanding of the ways that humanitarian sentiments underpin contemporary biopolitics, lending it a moral *raison d'être*. Can we account rhetorically for what Didier Fassin calls “humanitarian reason,” a sort of ontology that has come to be taken for granted, and that organizes political—and sometimes violent—State interventions under the aegis of humanitarianism and in the name of life itself? Fassin observes that “Humanitarian intervention is a biopolitics insofar as it sets up and manages refugee camps, establishes protected corridors in order to gain access to war casualties, develops statistical tools to measure malnutrition, and makes use of communication media to bear witness to injustice in the world.” Humanitarian intervention is “also a politics of life,” he continues, “in that it takes as its object the saving of individuals, which presupposes not only risking others but also making a selection of which existences it is possible or legitimate to save.” Humanitarian sentiments are at the very heart of that process of selection and operate implicitly in decisions over who will live and who will die.

A bit about the back-end of this course, its genesis and insight into the course rationale: I am building this course based on some of the themes that surface in Edna O’Brien’s latest novel, *The Little Red Chairs*—a fierce, unflinching, even merciless story—and in part inspired by her CBC Radio interview with Eleanor Wachtel (link below). In this interview, O’Brien reveals the authors she was reading as she wrote: “The . . . people I read most when I was writing this book were Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* . . . and Kafka’s ‘The Trial’ and ‘In the Penal Colony.’ They were the books that somehow, even though the stories are different of course, they were the books that whetted my appetite every day to write, to keep with what I was doing.”

This course reads the literary genealogy of O’Brien’s novel: Coetzee, Conrad, and Kafka. Aleatory, perhaps, but as Schopenhauer (and O’Brien) remark, nothing is by chance. Our snapshot into the lifeworlds represented in this prose will be complemented by a theoretical detour into biopolitics and the logics of humanitarian “responses” by Western democracies. It attempts to bring some recent political theory and philosophy into dialogue with the themes touched on in the literature—persecution, migration, refugees and asylum-seekers displaced due to war and/or famine, etc. Theoretical texts **TBA**, but may include works by Giorgio Agamben, Hannah Arendt, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Didier Fassin, Frédéric Gros, Michel Foucault, Jacques Rancière, Joseph Slaughter, and Susan Sontag.

Finally, this course also engages the theme of Carleton University’s *Strategic Integrated Plan*, “Sustainable Communities—Global Prosperity” (<https://carleton.ca/about/strategic-plan/>). By administrative fiat, and part of a public relations initiative, it would seem, researchers at Carleton are set the impossible task of promoting sustainable communities *and* global prosperity. Is this combination a neoliberal lie? Isn’t the “sustainability” and “prosperity” of one community purchased on the exploitation or pillage of others less fortunate? To what extent is a “sustainable” community incommensurable with global prosperity (whatever this might mean), and how, in any metric or fantasy, might global prosperity be imaginable within a system of transnational capitalism, scarce resources, global climate change, politico-religious ideology, etc.? This course turns to those very real casualties of global prosperity, its collateral damages—migrants, refugees, and others subject to persecution—whose communities were unsustainable, and who have been selected, by some Faustian bargain unknown to them, as those who are exposed to death and destitution, who are “allowed to die.” What is their story? And what are the conditions under which (if any) their story might be told, heard, and acted upon?

Literary Texts and Background

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*.

J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*.

Franz Kafka, “In the Penal Colony” and “The Trial.”

Edna O’Brien, *The Little Red Chairs*, 1st North American Edition (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2016).

Eleanor Wachtel, “Edna O’Brien on Fear, Dreams and LSD,” Writers & Company, CBC Radio, 15 May 2016, <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/writersandcompany/edna-o-brien-on-fear-dreams-and-bsd-1.3579581>.

Theoretical Texts and Background

Max Bearak, “1 in Every 113 Human Beings is Forcibly Displaced From Their Home Right Now,” *The Washington Post*, 20 June 2016,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/06/20/1-in-every-113-human-beings-right-now-is-forcibly-displaced-from-their-home/>.

Other texts **TBA** and will be available for photocopying.

Supplementary Materials

The course will also be supplemented by guest lectures by visiting international scholars:

- Prof. Barbara Biesecker, Department of Communication Studies, University of Georgia
“The Work of Sentimental Remembrance in the War on Terror”
 Week of 20–24 March 2017
- Prof. Sara Kendall, Kent Law School, University of Kent
TBA
- Others **TBA**

“Trigger” Warning

As much as the contemporary discourse on “triggering” and its problematic metaphors—and displaced agencies—offend me, a university course is not just a bureaucratic space but a place to confront an ethic of discomfort, as Foucault has called it. Some of the readings on this course reflect the unremitting violence, and the horrors of daily life for many human beings: war, sexual and gendered violence, racism, hatred. For those who are unwilling or unable, or would prefer not to engage seriously in such a discussion, this is perhaps not the best course for you. I expect mutual respect and will as much as I can foster a sense of community and collegiality. As Coetzee remarks, we read in order to become better artists and human beings, “and by better, I do not mean more skilful but ethically better.” If you have any concerns, please contact me.

O’Brien: “Why did I make my journey? I had to. You can’t write a pusillanimous story about something as serious as that.... It’s not disproportionate, that’s what’s happening in the world, and it’s happening to women. Rape is used ... as an instrument of war, as an extension of war. Why would I not? It would have been a failure on my part if I didn’t have that.... What war does is kills everyone in some form, either actually or psychically.”

Course Requirements and Evaluation¹

1. Seminar Presentation: 20%

The critical presentation of a text or texts from the assigned weekly readings, comprising:

- a. 20-minute presentation: Make a high quality, carefully prepared presentation (PowerPoint, hand-outs, props, etc. are optional). Come prepared with a text, aim for 2,500 words but practice and time it out. Avoid reading your text; this is not an academic conference presentation, but intended to generate discussion.
- b. Assume your audience has carefully read the text(s). Present an overview of the author's *purpose*: the claim(s), the controversies, the style of the text(s), the literary and/or rhetorical (persuasive) devices that are used, etc. Evaluate the "evidence" for the author's claim(s); you may also engage the author's critics. Then focus! Take time to analyse—perform a close reading of—one or two issues or passages that you find especially significant, revealing, suggestive, i.e., not just *what* the text is saying, but *how*. I encourage you to be creative.
- c. 15–30 minute discussion: Engage class questions and prompt discussion. The spirit of the seminar presentations is *collaborative, not competitive*.

2. Research Presentation: 20%

To be presented on **TBA** or **TBA**, a text or selected texts and theme as chosen by you, as an opportunity to "workshop" your emergent Research Paper. It will be a critical engagement with or an application of a key text or texts. I encourage you to locate a "site" (object, text, social/political movement, controversy) in the world, however you wish to define this, whether real, political, literary, filmic, etc.:

- a. Based on your research for the final Research Paper, select one short text or object (maximum of one chapter or journal article, or just a selection – aim for 10–15 pages). **Distribute this text at least one week before your Research Presentation, email me and I will upload it to the Course Readings section of our course website.**
- b. Please note, your text can be visual, filmic, a social movement, etc., so you might have to be creative in how to share this, either in PDF format, as web link, etc.
- c. The presentation itself is meant to facilitate the collaborative space of the classroom and to help with the production of a better final Research Paper for each participant. You will have 15 minutes to present. At the very least, you should bring to class an outline of your presentation to share with co-participants in the seminar, but the more you write down and can share with the class the better. To be clear, you should aim for roughly 2,000 words of *written prose* per presentation, though you may present this prose in less or more formal ways during the presentation. The goal is to move your research along and, ultimately, words on a page are more important than words spoken in class. In your presentation, do not summarize the text you have selected; rather, develop your

¹ Standing in a course is determined by the course instructor subject to the approval of the Faculty Dean. This means that grades submitted by the instructor may be subject to revision. No grades are final until they have been approved by the Dean.

thesis and support this with textual evidence. **Argument = Claim + Textual Evidence.**

- d. 15–30 minutes, discussion/collaboration: encourage participation and an open exchange of ideas and constructive criticism.

3. **Research Paper (20–25 pp.): 60%**

Due **TBA**, submitted via email to stuart.murray@carleton.ca:

- a. This will normally be the workshopped and refined version of your Research Presentation, in polished essay format, in MLA, APA, or Chicago format.
- b. I am available to discuss your ideas throughout the course.
- c. I will send a return email confirming that I have received your essay and can open it.

4. **Attendance and Active Participation**

Attendance and participation are required and expected throughout the course; three or more unexcused absences will result in failing the course. That said, if you're ill please stay home, take care of yourself, and send a brief email to let me know.

The Fine Print

Assignment Lateness Policy

Submit all assignments on or before the due date unless special arrangements have been made with me prior to the deadline. Late assignments will be reduced by one grade per day (including Saturdays and Sundays). E.g., from B+ to B for one day, B+ to B- for two days, etc. Over weekends, email the paper and present a hard copy to the department essay drop-box on Monday.

Academic Integrity and Academic Offences (e.g., plagiarism)

The University Senate defines plagiarism as “*presenting, whether intentionally or not, the ideas, expression of ideas or work of others as one’s own.*” Carleton University’s Academic Integrity Policy can be accessed at <http://www2.carleton.ca/studentaffairs/academic-integrity>.

Academic Accommodation (official University text below, but please come see me or email me for any concerns you may have throughout the semester)

You may need special arrangements to meet your academic obligations during the term because of disability, medical considerations or religious obligations. Please review the course outline promptly and write to me with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist.

Students with disabilities requiring academic accommodations in this course must register with the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities (PMC) for a formal evaluation of disability-related needs. Documented disabilities could include but are not limited to mobility/physical impairments, specific Learning Disabilities (LD), psychiatric/psychological disabilities, sensory disabilities, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and chronic medical conditions. Registered PMC students are required to contact the PMC, 613-520-6608, every term to ensure that your Instructor receives your Letter of Accommodation, no later than two weeks before the first assignment is due or the first assignment requiring accommodations.

You can visit the Equity Services website to view the policies and to obtain more detailed information on academic accommodation at <http://carleton.ca/equity/accommodation>.