

## Department of English &amp; Writing Studies

**Reading Popular Culture**  
**English 2017 (001)**  
Fall/Winter 2016-17

**Instructor:** Riley McDonald  
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Office hours: Wed. 11:30am-1:30pm

**Location:** Western Science Center 55

**Date/Time:** Monday 10:30am-12:30pm,  
Wednesday 10:30am-11:30am

**Teaching Assistant:** Matthew Prout  
Office: AHB 2G30A  
Office hours: Mon. 12:30pm-1:30pm,  
Wed. 3:30pm-4:30pm

**Prerequisite(s):** No prerequisites required.

Unless you have either the requisites for this course or written special permission from your Dean to enroll in it, you may be removed from this course and it will be deleted from your record. This decision may not be appealed. You will receive no adjustment to your fees in the event that you are dropped from a course for failing to have the necessary prerequisites.

Course Description

“Popular culture” is a curious term: the more we think about what it means the less familiar it becomes. What makes certain types of culture popular and others not? Who is involved in this taste-making and distribution process, and what are the operations behind this process? What is the role of the audience in the meaning of popular culture—are they merely passive receivers, or do they possess a power to influence this area of society? Are there borders or boundaries to the range and influence of popular culture? And is a cultural production inherently divided into “mainstream” and “subversive,” or does it undergo continual reinterpretation and reorganization? When thinking of these questions (and others), popular culture becomes a much more complicated (and fascinating) object of discussion.

This course provides students with an intensive, informative, and entertaining view of how to engage popular culture critically, examining the historical and theoretical underpinnings of culture and how it applies to current popular artifacts (superhero movies, sitcoms, graphic novels, etc.). In the first term, students will look at how cultural meaning is made, produced, and consumed, and learn a valuable theoretical vocabulary and framework for critically discussing culture. During the second semester, students will apply these larger ideas to explore how different populations respond, critique, and transform cultural production, and see how gender, sexuality, race, age, and other subjects each inflect and inform how cultural ideas are received and challenged.

**Objectives:**

By the end of the course, successful students will be able to:

- Gain critical and historical perspectives on how cultural artifacts are produced, distributed, and received, and how these meanings are challenged and/or accepted over time;
- Explore how culture and cultural productions are connected to various historical, political, social, and economic models and movements;
- Learn how to engage in thorough and dedicated close readings and analyses of cultural media, including novels, films, television, music videos, comic books, commercials, etc.;
- Build a necessary catalogue of key terms, ideas, concepts, and thinkers who have developed the idea of cultural studies and popular culture;
- Develop the skills to discuss and engage in sustained cultural analysis and critique;
- Practice and hone writing skills necessary for upper-year university courses, as well as learning proper formatting and researching style;
- Apply ideas and discourses learned in class to the texts and contexts that are omnipresent outside of class and in everyday life.

Course Materials

**Required Texts:**

Susie O'Brien & Imre Szeman – *Popular Culture: A User's Guide*, 3rd. Ed  
Charles Burns – *Black Hole*  
Ta-Nehisi Coates – *Between the World and Me*  
Nnedi Okorafor – *Lagoon*

NB: These texts are all available in the UC Bookstore

Methods of Evaluation

The grade for the course will be arrived at as follows:

Participation	10%
Short paper (1000 words)	10%
Quizzes	15%
Midterm	15%
Research Essay (1250-1500 words)	15%
Final Exam	35%

**Participation:** Participation marks for this class will be determined via a combination of class attendance and participation, as well as discussions on the OWL site, about which more below.

As ENGL-2017 is a lecture course, there are not always opportunities to engage in sustained discussion in the classroom. Because I think it is important to work through and talk about ideas, rather than just receiving them from a single source, each week Matt and I will post some discussion questions to the OWL site. Students are encouraged to respond to the questions, engage with other students' responses, and/or post their own questions in the forum for others to take up.

To receive the full participation mark, students will need to demonstrate a familiarity and understanding of the course materials and a willingness to engage in *constructive* discussion with other students and with questions and thought experiments posed. For example, when

discussing one of our course texts, students can consider the OWL site as a place to comment on and tease out themes not discussed in the course. Students' responses should be thoughtful and analytical; saying that you liked or disliked an example used in class or a theory without explicating why is not sufficient. The best way to approach this mark is to think of it as a respectful, critical online discussion. There are no metrics that need to be achieved here (word counts, frequency of posts): what we are looking for is proof that students have read and thought about the material, and are willing to explore their own critical opinions as well as others'.

Matt and I will post questions but not actively take part in discussions; we don't want to monopolize the conversation or act as though we are all-knowing arbiters of cultural studies (we are not). That said, we will be monitoring the discussions, and will intervene in order to correct any errors, as well as to make sure discussions remain civil and relevant to the topic at-hand.

**Short Paper:** Due in first semester. A short, formal paper dealing with a cultural artifact not discussed in the course. Consider an element of culture that you are interested in, whether it's a music video or film you like, or an episode of television you find problematic or interesting. Using the concepts about cultural production and reception covered in the course lectures, think about how these elements are encoded into this cultural object. This paper should be analytical, rather than expository: in other words, don't just summarize your piece of culture, and make sure that you are thinking originally and critically about how this artwork relates to the ideas in the course (that is, don't just repeat what was said in the lecture verbatim). Secondary sources are not required for this assignment, but a sustained analysis involving an introduction to your argument, a clear thesis statement, and a clear progression of ideas must be present. MLA formatting is required. Due in hardcopy by 4:30 on specified date.

**Quizzes:** A total of four (4) fifteen-minute quizzes distributed at the beginning of classes throughout the entire year. Note that only the top three (3) quizzes will be counted toward the final grade.

**Midterm:** A one-hour test taking place toward the end of the first semester. This examination will require students to identify key terms and thinkers discussed in the course, as well as longer critical discussions of the larger ideas discussed during the term.

**Final Research Paper:** Due in second semester. A formal, analytic essay providing a sustained engagement with the notion of identity in popular culture as they relate to one of the texts taught in class (whether it be one of the assigned novels, films, music videos, etc. NOTE: you can select something from first term). This essay will follow the same organization and method of argument as the short paper, but in addition students are required to consult at least two (2) secondary sources relating to ideas of identity discussed in class and how they operate. These sources should espouse a position on the object you're writing about (for instance, an academic paper on radical feminism, or a newspaper article discussing the Black Lives Matter movement) that you can use to evaluate and explore the questions of identity in these texts. The purpose of this assignment is to get you to become critically involved in the discussion of identity and representation in popular culture. MLA formatting required. Due in hardcopy by 4:30 on specified date.

**Final Exam:** A three-hour final examination that will cover course material from the entire year, not just the second semester. As with the midterm, this exam will test students on definitions as well as critical engagement with the course's themes and ideas.

A student must receive a passing grade for both term work and the final examination in order to receive a passing grade for the course. This applies to all courses in all programs offered by the department. Students whose term and final exam grades average 50% or above, even though one of the two is a failure, shall receive a default grade of 48%. **Please note:** The department of English & Writing Studies does not release final grades. All undergraduate grade reports will be available online from the Office of the Registrar.

Students are fully responsible for looking at and being familiar with the information posted on the department website at <http://www.uwo.ca/english/undergraduate/info%20for%20students.html#grade>.

**Attendance:** Making sure to attend the lectures, take notes, and engage in class discussions is an important factor of this course, comprising 5% of the final mark. Students who are too frequently absent may, per the Western Academic Calendar, "will be reported to the Dean (after due warning has been given). On the recommendation of the Department concerned, and with the permission of the Dean, the student will be debarred from taking the regular examination."

**Late Penalty:** Assignments are due on the specified dates (noted below) in hardcopy. Late assignments will receive a 2% per day late penalty (including weekends). Extensions will be granted only for extenuating circumstances, and will require proper documentation.

Although papers are due in hardcopy, please make sure to keep a copy of your submitted assignment until final grades have are received.

**Email and Office Hours:** The instructor and teaching assistants will respond to email queries within one business day during the week, and by Monday on weekends. Students are advised to please contact their teaching assistants first about questions on course material or assignments. If students believe their question will be better answered by the instructor, then they are advised to e-mail him directly, but make sure not to neglect T.A.s and their invaluable insights!

Instructors and teaching assistants hold weekly office hours (noted above) to work through questions about the course, including readings, assignments, and lecture material. If unable to attend the set office hours, please email your teaching assistant or the course instructor to schedule a time when both can meet.

**Timetable:**

**Fall Term: Concepts**

Monday, Sep. 12: Introduction: What is Popular Culture?

- No readings

Wednesday, Sep. 14: Introduction (cont'd)

- O'Brien & Szeman – chapter 1 (pp. 1-32)

Monday, Sep. 19: History of Popular Culture

- O'Brien & Szeman – chapter 2 (pp. 32-63)
- Excerpts from *The Simpsons*, *The Avengers*, *Game of Thrones*

Wednesday, Sep. 21: History of Popular Culture (cont'd)

Monday, Sep. 26: Locating Culture: Exploring Space and Place

- O'Brien & Szeman – chapter 9 (pp. 271-292)
- Michel de Certeau – “The Practice of Everyday Life” (OWL)
- Excerpts from *Manufacturing Landscapes* (2008)

Wednesday, Sep. 28: Locating Culture (cont'd)

Monday, Oct. 3: Production I – The Ideologies of Culture

- O'Brien & Szeman – chapter 4 (pp. 100-117)
- Stuart Hall – “Encoding, Decoding” (OWL)

Wednesday, Oct. 5: Production I (cont'd)

- Raymond Williams – “Culture is Ordinary” (OWL)

Monday, Oct. 10: THANKSGIVING, NO CLASSES

Wednesday, Oct. 12: Production I (cont'd)

- *Huffington Post* – “Uber Legalized in Ottawa Over Taxi Drivers' Protests”  
([http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/04/13/uber-ottawa-legalized-taxi-drivers\\_n\\_9684726.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/04/13/uber-ottawa-legalized-taxi-drivers_n_9684726.html))

Monday, Oct. 17: Production II: There's Money in Advertising

- O'Brien & Szeman – chapter 4 (pp. 118-137)
- Gloria Steinem – “Sex, Lies, and Advertising” (OWL)
- In-class screening: *Mad Men*, season 1, episode 1

Wednesday, Oct. 19: Production II (cont'd)

- T.J. Jackson Lears – “From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of Consumer Culture” (OWL)

Monday, Oct. 24: Consumption I: What Are We Consuming?

- O'Brien & Szeman – chapter 5 (pp. 138-156)
- Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer – “The Culture Industry” (OWL)

Wednesday, Oct. 26: Consumption I (cont'd)

- Excerpts from *Cooked*, season 1, episode 2

Monday, Oct. 31: Consumption II: What's Consuming Us?

- O'Brien & Szeman – chapter 5 (pp. 156-167)
- In-class screening: *iZombie*, season 1, episodes 1-2

Wednesday, Nov. 2: Consumption II (cont'd)

Monday, Nov. 7: Globalization I: The Flows of Capital

- O'Brien & Szeman – chapter 10 (pp. 295-316)
- Zygmunt Bauman – excerpts from *Liquid Modernity* (OWL)

Wednesday, Nov. 9: Globalization I (cont'd)

- In-class screening: *Last Week Tonight*, season 1, episode 10 (“The Wealth Gap”)

Monday, Nov. 14: Globalization II: Perilous Connectivity

- Nnedi Okorafor – *Lagoon*

Wednesday, Nov. 16: Midterm review

Monday, Nov. 21: MIDTERM

Wednesday, Nov. 23: Globalization II (cont'd)

- Nnedi Okorafor – *Lagoon*
- Excerpts from *District 9* (2009)

Monday, Nov. 28: The Subcultural Style

- O'Brien & Szeman – chapter 8 (pp. 237-269)
- In-class screening: *The Weather Underground* (2002)

Wednesday, Nov. 30: The Subcultural Style (cont'd)

- Dick Hebdige – “Subculture and Style” (OWL)

Monday, Dec. 5: The Countercultural Force/Culture Jamming

- Naomi Klein – excerpts from *No Logo* (OWL)

Wednesday, Dec. 7: The Countercultural Force (cont'd)

- Excerpts from *Fight Club* (1999)

## **Term Two: Representing Identities**

Monday, Jan. 9: The Concept(s) of Identity

- O'Brien & Szeman – chapter 3 (pp. 63-72), chapter 6 (pp. 167-179)

Wednesday, Jan. 11: The Concept(s) of Identity (cont'd)

Monday, Jan. 16: Representing Invisibility – Youth in Revolt

- O'Brien & Szeman – chapter 3 (pp. 72-100)

Wednesday, Jan. 18: Representing Invisibility (cont'd)

- Charles Burns – *Black Hole*

Monday, Jan. 23: On Seeing and Not Seeing: Representation and Graphic Narrative

- Charles Burns – *Black Hole*
- Scott McCloud – excerpts from *Understanding Comics* (OWL)

Wednesday, Jan. 25: On Seeing and Not Seeing (cont'd)

Monday, Jan. 30: Representing Bodies I: How Culture Looks at the Gendered Body

- Laura Mulvey – “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (OWL)
- Excerpts from *Ex Machina* (2015)

Wednesday, Feb. 1: Representing Bodies I (cont'd)

- Susan Bordo – excerpts from *Unbearable Weight*

Monday, Feb. 6: Representing Bodies II: Queered Identities/Queering Identities

- In-class screening: TBA

Wednesday, Feb. 8: Representing Bodies II (cont'd)

- Judith Halberstam – “Drag Kings: Masculinity and Performance” (OWL)

Monday, Feb. 13: Race Studies I: Constructing Race

- O'Brien & Szeman – chapter 7 (pp. 203-222)
- Ta-Nehisi Coates – *Between the World and Me*

Wednesday, Feb. 15: Race Studies I (cont'd)

Monday, Feb. 20: READING WEEK, NO CLASSES

Wednesday, Feb. 22: READING WEEK, NO CLASSES

Monday, Feb. 27: Race Studies II: Black Lives Matter

- Ta-Nehisi Coates – *Between the World and Me*
- In-class screening: Beyoncé – *Lemonade* (2016)

Wednesday, Mar. 01: Race Studies II:

- In-class screening: *Black-ish*, season 3, episode 16

Monday, Mar. 06: Postcolonial Studies I: National (Dis)Identities

- O'Brien & Szeman – chapter 7 (pp. 223-237)
- Edward Said – excerpts from *Orientalism* (OWL)
- Excerpts from *Sex and the City 2* (2010)

Wednesday, Mar. 08: Postcolonial Studies I (cont'd)

- Excerpts from *Rang de Basanti* (2006)

Monday, Mar. 13: Postcolonial Studies II: Settler Ideologies

- Thomas King – “Forget Columbus” (OWL)
- Excerpts from *The Lone Ranger* (2013)

Wednesday, Mar. 15: Postcolonial Studies II (cont'd)

- In-class screening: *I'm Not the Indian You Had in Mind*

Monday, Mar. 20: Posthumanisms I: Escaping or Embracing the Body?

- Donna Haraway – “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” (OWL)

Wednesday, Mar. 22: Posthumanisms I (cont'd)

- *The New Scientist* – “What does it mean to be posthuman?”  
(<https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg21829162-400-what-does-it-mean-to-be-posthuman/>)
  - o FINAL RESEARCH PAPER DUE

Monday, Mar. 27: Posthumanisms II: Robots, Cyborgs, and Androids—Oh My!

- In-class screening: *I'm a Cyborg, but That's OK* (2009)

Wednesday, Mar. 29: Posthumanisms II (cont'd)

Monday, Apr. 03: The Googleplex: The Net, The Cloud, and Augmented Reality

- O'Brien & Szeman – chapter 10 (pp. 316-349)
- *The Guardian* – “How augmented reality technology erases the human v machine boundary” (<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/jul/14/augmented-reality-technology-pokemon-go-phones>)

Wednesday, Apr. 05: Exam Review

### Accommodation

Students seeking academic accommodation on medical grounds for any missed tests, exams, participation components and/or assignments worth 10% or more of their final grade must apply to the Academic Counselling office of their home Faculty and provide documentation. Academic accommodation cannot be granted by the instructor or department. Documentation shall be submitted, as soon as possible, to the Office of the Dean of the student's Faculty of registration, together with a request for relief specifying the nature of the accommodation being requested. The UWO Policy on Accommodation for Medical Illness and further information regarding this policy can be found at [http://uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/appeals/accommodation\\_medical.pdf](http://uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/accommodation_medical.pdf).

### **Downloadable Student Medical Certificate (SMC):**

[http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/appeals/medicalform.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/medicalform.pdf)

### Academic Offences

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at

[http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/appeals/scholastic\\_discipline\\_undergrad.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf)

### **Plagiarism:**

Students must write their essays and assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea or passage from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations. Plagiarism is a major academic offence.



**Plagiarism Checking:**

All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com <http://www.turnitin.com>.

Support Services

Registrarial Services <http://www.registrar.uwo.ca>

Student Support Services <https://student.uwo.ca/psp/heprdweb/?cmd=login>

Services provided by the USC <http://westernusc.ca/services/>

Student Development Centre <http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/>

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to MentalHealth@Western:  
<http://www.uwo.ca/uwocom/mentalhealth/> for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.