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## Engl 360/560: "Black Britain"

❖ Read this long and intimidating document and thoroughly familiarize yourself with its contents. ❖  
As Jack Webb used to intone on the old cop show "Dragnet": Ignorance of the law is no excuse.

There have been people of color in Britain for almost two millennia. North Africans were part of the Roman army stationed in northern England as long ago as the third century C.E., and Britain's imperial history, along with its involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, have meant that there has been a continuous black presence in the British Isles for well over 400 years.

But it was really after British colonial subjects began migrating to the UK in great numbers after World War II that the category "black" began to seriously trouble or complicate the category "British." And it was even more recently that those two terms were strategically and self-consciously joined together—i.e., that the phenomenon known as "Black Britain" was named into being, largely by writers and artists, in order to forge a unique political and cultural identity. This imagined nation wouldn't survive intact all that long: it turned out—spoiler alert!—that the label "Black" could only precariously unite people of African, Afro-Caribbean, "Asian" (itself a problematic term) and mixed-race descent. Nevertheless the issues—and the consciousness—it raised have had a lasting effect on what it means to be culturally, ethnically, and nationally British in the 21st century. Our focus in this class, then, won't necessarily be on UK writers and artists who are unproblematically "Black," but rather on the cultural and intellectual work they have done to bring an evolving and contested sense of Black Britishness into being.

### Texts

Yes, this is an upper-division survey of a very broad field. Nevertheless I'm requiring you to buy just two books (at the HSU Bookstore or anywhere else you can find them), namely:

- Samuel Selvon's novel *The Lonely Londoners* and
- Caryl Phillips's novel *Crossing the River*

Much of the other material of interest to us is either out of print, hard to find in the U.S., or inconveniently scattered across a variety of sources. So I will make all other required reading—stories, poems, memoirs, essays, etc.—available to you on the Web. (See the "Course Reader" page of the course website, *not* Moodle or "ONCORES.") Since most publishers these days have adopted an extremely uncharitable position as to what constitutes "fair use" for educational purposes, you'll be asked to enter a username and a password to gain access to it. (They're on the print copy of the syllabus that I distributed in class.) Some of these materials reflect my conviction that putting imaginative writing into dialogue with other kinds of writing—critical, theoretical, expository—helps all of them make a different kind of sense. Please note that the Reader's contents may evolve as the semester wears on; I'll do my best to keep you abreast of changes and additions.

### Course Requirements/Assignments

**Reading Responses:** There will be times when I'll need to lecture at you or perform a bit of show-and-tell. But just as often—more often—I expect you to be enthusiastic learners who are willing to explore this territory both independently and coöperatively. Here's one way how: on eight (8) occasions of your choice (out of a *whole bunch* of opportunities), you'll post responses to some of our assigned texts on a series of Moodle discussion forums. I realize that various factors can conspire to rob this now-very-old-

school “social medium” of its full potential for knowledge-pooling and community-building. Just the same, writing about a text is one of the best ways I know to gather your inchoate thoughts about it and begin giving them some shape. So, um...what exactly do I mean by a “reading response”? Look for a separate, long-winded handout. For now, let me stick to logistics and theory.

Whenever you choose to write responses, **you must post them no later than 8:00 p.m. on the dates specified in the calendar** (below), so that I and others have a fighting chance of digesting it, or at least tasting it, before the next day’s class. I recommend composing in Word, then copying and pasting into Moodle. (For safety’s sake, save a copy of your work locally *and* print out a hard copy for yourself. You could even bring it with you to refer to in class.) Late responses will normally incur a penalty, and failure to make your eight-response quota may result in a failing grade.

Each response must be at least 400 words, and in principle, the more you write, the more credit you’ll earn (see the aforementioned handout for details). But since this requirement is aimed first and foremost at getting you to think out loud, without undue pressure or judgment, about challenging texts, I will ordinarily just read each post and tally your credit (assuming the post is credit-worthy to begin with), unless you specifically ask me to respond to you personally about the *substance* of your submission.

Collectively, these responses—which, though informal, should still be thoughtful, not slapdash—may constitute freestanding, parallel discussions to those we have in class, especially if enough people build the momentum to carry them along. (If you’re motivated by such things, you can guarantee yourself a boost of at least  $\frac{1}{3}$  of a grade on any given response by writing a follow-up post, preferably in reaction to someone *else*’s first post, before the next forum opens. Again: consult the handout.) But even if a genuine online discussion fails to erupt, the act of taking the trouble to work your gut reactions into articulate ideas will still give you some ready-made material to haul out to in class. Occasionally I may bring material from the forums into the classroom and use your on-line responses as starting points for in-class discussion. But even if they just languish on the online shelf, it’ll be nice to have ‘em on hand.

I will often post reading or study questions to Moodle to help you get started, especially early in the semester. You, meanwhile, should always feel free to log on and make a spontaneous post of any length, at any time, even if you’re not doing so for credit: gripes, questions, objections or clarifications; remarks on something that someone did or didn’t say in class; afterthoughts or second thoughts about the texts; etc.—it’s all fair game. Lively, even heated, debate is fine by me. Just don’t get personal or abusive (or racist or sexist), and make sure you keep a civil tongue.

At the end of the day, I’m mostly interested in having you put in the care and attention required to cook these things up. A class discussion can be a lot more interesting, however, if you’ve had a chance to read, hash over, and maybe even respond to what other folks are thinking *before* you all sit down in a room together. To that end, then, everyone should try to at least glance at what other folks have written. (Believe me, you’ll often find some brilliant ideas there.)

**Attendance/Preparation/Participation:** You shouldn’t feel as though you’re under continual pressure to demonstrate how brilliant and eloquent you are, but you should try diligently hold up your end of the conversation, just the same—to show some degree of intelligence, inquisitiveness and engagement, both in responding to your classmates and to the materials on the table, and in helping to control the direction and flow of the conversation. To that end, you’ll need to (1) do all the assigned reading, carefully and on time, (2) think about—and write down—your responses to the things you read, asking yourself questions that will help you form and develop ideas about them (see above), and (3) do your small part to help start class discussions and keep them going by airing your ideas, your problems, and your questions along

with everyone else. I understand what it means to be quiet and shy, but in a class like this, but you can't be absolutely anonymous.

To contribute to a good discussion, of course (and to get anything *out* of one), you've got to *be here*. So even though you might resent such apparent condescension, I will pass around a sign-in sheet at the beginning of each class session, and you should make sure your name is on it in order to receive at least minimal credit for this portion of your course grade. I'll give you four (4) free passes to cover all the contingencies of life, both serious and trivial—no explanations, no apologies, no penalties. (A courtesy e-mail is always welcome, of course, and it's up to you to keep track of what you missed and/or what's on tap for the next meeting). Miss more than four classes, and your grade will start to suffer; the more you miss, the more it'll hurt. Routine absences should not include exam days or days when major assignments are due. If you're gone more than six times (that's 20% of the course!), I will strenuously encourage you to withdraw—assuming I've noticed in time.

Finally: please get to class on time, don't wander in and out, don't spend class time messaging, Facebooking, or web-surfing, and don't bug out early. At the end of the semester, attendance, preparedness, engagement, participation, and all-round good citizenship can make the difference between two grades.

### **Other work:**

*Undergraduates* will complete a series of reading quizzes, as well as

- 1) a midterm on Black Britons' early efforts to establish themselves in the nation's literary consciousness (the take-home essay portion of this exam will ask you to draw some comparative conclusions about two or more of the texts we've studied in the first six weeks of the semester, probably with reference to some of the ancillary resources that I've made available to you—critical and historical essays, websites, etc.) and
- 2) a final exam focused on how contemporary writers of color have mapped the intersections (and the intersectionalities) of "Blackness" and Britishness in an age of transnationalism and multi-ethnicity.

*Graduate students* will supplement the reading quizzes with a 15-20 page seminar paper and a related short presentation.

### **Grading**

Here's where the oppressive substructure of my seemingly benign classroom shows through. I try to go by the book, which was written in the days before rampant grade inflation: "A" is reserved for exceptionally, stunningly well-written, well-spoken and insightful stuff. "B" work is extra-ordinary—it exceeds minimal expectations for basic competency. "C" is standard and normal; it meets the minimum requirements in every way. "D" is credit-worthy (barely), and we all know what "F" means. If you're taking the class CR/NC, you need the equivalent of a "C" to pass. You must attempt all required work in order to receive a grade. I don't expect to give any Incompletes. Here's how your final course grade will break down:

*Undergrads:*

- Attendance/Participation/Etc.: 10%
- Reading Responses: 20%
- Reading Quizzes (cumulative): 15%
- Midterm: 25%
- Final: 30%

*Grad Students:*

- Attendance/Participation/Etc.: 10%
- Reading Responses: 30%
- Reading Quizzes (cumulative): 15%
- Seminar Paper: 30%
- Presentation: 15%

## **Miscellany**

**Disabilities:** Please let me know of any documented disabilities and recommended accommodations that would promote your success in this class.

**Plagiarism:** I take academic dishonesty very seriously. Passing off part or all of someone else's words or ideas as your own will result—at the very least—in a failing grade for the course. The university's definition of and policies regarding academic dishonesty can be found in the HSU catalog. Please be aware that plagiarism and other forms of dishonesty can result in expulsion from the University.

**Communication:** I will post official communiqués (assignments, reminders, schedule changes, afterthoughts or announcements I forgot to make in class, etc.) to the course "Updates" page, which you should get in the habit of monitoring that page regularly. (If *you* have something for general distribution—an announcement, a cool weblink, etc.—feel free to send it to me, and I'll post it there.) I will normally post updates by 8:00 p.m. Mondays and Wednesdays. Remember: the Updates page *always* trumps the syllabus.

With few exceptions, I will read and respond to everything you turn in and put a grade on your formal written work, and I will happily meet with you at any time to talk about your progress and prospects. If a personal disaster befalls you in the course of the semester—your house burns down, your computer crashes, a marauding horde carries off your livestock—please don't be embarrassed, and don't just disappear: let me know what's going on, and as soon as humanly possible. At the very least, I can direct you to campus resources that may help, and together we may even be able to devise a plan to get you through the semester in one piece. I don't guarantee that I can accommodate every unexpected turn of events; you should also be prepared to withdraw from one or more courses, or from the university entirely, if a bad situation becomes chronic or dire. But there are sometimes contingency plans that can be put into effect if students alert their faculty promptly of personal crises that threaten their academic performance.

As for more routine problems: if you're getting behind in the class, feeling as though you're not "getting" something, or just having an intangible problem either mild or severe, ***don't sit around fretting and cowering: come and talk to me without delay.***

If your schedule *absolutely* cannot be changed to accommodate my regular office hours, that doesn't mean we can't meet. Stop me after class and we'll try to find a mutually agreeable time.

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FOR ADDITIONAL COURSE POLICIES AND OTHER MORE GENERAL INFORMATION (ON CLASSROOM ETIQUETTE, MINIMUM OUTSIDE PREPARATION REQUIRED FOR THIS COURSE, PLAGIARISM & ACADEMIC DISHONESTY, DETAILED DISABILITY ACCOMMODATION, SEXUAL HARASSMENT & DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR, SAFETY INFORMATION, ETC.) LAID OUT IN EVEN MORE EXCRUCIATING DETAIL, SEE THE "COURSE POLICIES AND SYLLABUS ADDENDA" PAGE ONLINE AT [HTTP://USERS.HUMBOLDT.EDU/MSELDRIDGE/ENGL350/bb/350bbpolicies.htm](http://users.humboldt.edu/mseldrige/ENGL350/bb/350bbpolicies.htm) IT IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF ALL STUDENTS TO READ AND UNDERSTAND THIS INFORMATION.

## CALENDAR

(Warning: potentially volatile! Assigned reading, due dates, and reading schedule are subject to change.  
Please check the “Updates” page of the class website daily!)

*Unless otherwise noted, all reading assignments listed below are required, and should be completed by the day on which they appear on the calendar. Be aware, however, that you will always find additional reading and/or web resources—in all cases highly recommended—on the page of the Course Reader devoted to each unit. I strongly encourage you to make time for as much of this supplemental material as you can. Reading responses should focus primarily on the required reading for any given day, but you should feel free to incorporate any relevant thinking about the ancillary material, as well.*

Jan. 20	w Helloes and housekeeping.
Jan. 25 & 27	m Introduction: When did Britain become “black”? Recommended: “General Web Resources” page (class website) and “Introduction” page (online course reader) <b>“BLACKBIRDS” AND OTHER BLACK BRITISH PIONEERS.</b> w Course Reader: Gronniosaw, Equiano, Sancho (reading response due Tue., Jan. 26)
Feb. 1 & 3	m Course Reader: Martin (reading response due Sun., Jan. 31). w Course Reader: Prince, Cliff, Said (reading response due Tue., Feb. 2)
Feb. 8 & 10	<b>THE BREEZE BEFORE THE STORM (PRE- “WINDRUSH” TRANSIENTS AND VISITORS).</b> m Course Reader: James, Marson (reading response due Sun., Feb. 7). w Course Reader: Desani (reading response due Tue., Feb. 9).
Feb. 15 & 17	m Pp. 125-237 (“Somewhere In England”) of <i>Crossing the River</i> . Course Reader: Scobie (reading response due Sun., Feb. 14). w Course Reader: Cunard & Padmore
Feb. 22 & 24	<b>WINDRUSH GENERATION.</b> <i>The Lonely Londoners</i> . Course Reader: NPR story, Soyinka, MacInnes (reading response due Sun., Feb. 21). Midterm take-home essay distributed (w).
Feb. 29 & Mar. 2	m <i>The Lonely Londoners</i> , continued. w Course Reader: Lord Kitchener, Mighty Terror. (Midterm take-home essay due.)
Mar. 7 & 9	<b>IT DREAD INNA INGLAN.</b> Course Reader: Gilroy, Powell (reading response due Sun., Mar. 6).
Mar. 21 & 23	Course Reader: Johnson, Zephaniah, Emecheta (reading response due Sun., Mar. 20).
Mar. 28 & 30	<b>FITE DEM BACK.</b> Course Reader: Gilroy, Johnson, Zephaniah (reading response due Sun., Mar. 27).
Apr. 4 & 6	m Course Reader: Dabydeen, Agard, Nichols (reading response due Sun., Apr. 3) <b>LONDON KILLS ME: THE BREAK-UP OF BLACK BRITAIN.</b> w Course Reader: Eldridge. Screening of <i>My Son the Fanatic</i> .
Apr. 11 & 13	m Course Reader: Kureishi, screenplay of <i>MSTF</i> and “The Rainbow Sign” (reading response due Sun., Apr. 10) w Course Reader: Apache Indian, Rushdie, “Goodness Gracious Me.”
Apr. 18 & 20	<b>“AFTER” BLACK BRITAIN: WHAT KIND OF BLACK?</b> m Course Reader: D’Aguiar, Hall, Gilroy (reading response due Sun., Apr. 17). w Course Reader: Adebayo (reading response due Tue., Apr. 19).
Apr. 25 & 27	m Adebayo, continued. Course Reader: Kay (reading response due Sun., Apr. 24). w Kay, continued. Course Reader: Smith (reading response due Tues., Apr. 26).
May 2 & 4	m Smith, continued. w Final remarks, course evaluations, tearful farewells. Recommended (Course Reader): Nwajiku, Johnson, Gates.
May 9 (8:00-9:50 [ulp!])	m The activities scheduled for the final week of classes may spill over into this, our final exam period, especially if we’ve fallen behind. I hope not to have to use it, but <i>please keep this date and time available on your calendars</i> , just in case.

**ALL FINAL COURSEWORK DUE NO LATER THAN 9:50 A.M. ON MONDAY, MAY 9TH.**