Field: Modern World – British and American Imperial History

Program Statement

I began my time in History and Literature as a member of the only Postcolonial Studies tutorial offered in the spring of 2015. I didn’t know very much about British history or theories of imperialism, and had no awareness of the historiography and literary discourse that had led to the discipline we think of as postcolonialism. In fact, I had spent my first year and a half at Harvard taking Earth and Planetary Science and General Education courses. Given that, I was most excited to use sophomore tutorial as an opportunity to “catch up” on theoretical and historiographical material that I felt like I had missed and would need to understand. (I knew names like Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhaba, and Stuart Hall, for example, but had no sense of the contexts they fit into or why their contributions were significant). I spent the tutorial getting a good grounding in how to analyze and use a variety of different sources, and had my first oral exam experience at the end. I also received a decent survey of British colonial history in East Africa. I continued feeling like I lacked understanding of relevant critical theory and the history of the discipline, however, so I thought I would focus on that in junior tutorial.

I tried to pursue these interests in the fall of 2015 by developing a syllabus that included this kind of content. I decided to focus on British and American imperial history within the postcolonial studies field (soon to become the Modern World Field) because I thought that having a broad focus would give me the time to figure out what, if any, more specific interests I had later on. The fall portion of the junior tutorial process didn’t go well for me, mostly because I struggled with being responsible both for developing and studying the content we were putting together. But I did ultimately realize that my preoccupation with critical theory was misplaced and was preventing me from studying other things that I was developing interest in. I wasn’t “missing” anything that prevented me from engaging with work in the discipline, and furthermore, the theoretical essays and book chapters that I was electing were best read in conversation with primary source material representative of the contexts the developed in or were responding to.

Beginning with the spring of 2016, I took classes and did research projects based on this understanding. The papers I have produced in the past year have dramatically improved my writing and editing ability. I learned and wrote about police officers working in India during the British Raj for my Junior Paper. My most significant takeaway coming out of that writing experience was the understanding that I couldn’t produce a paper or any other scholarly work with my own analysis alone – I had to engage with a preexisting academic conversation about my topic for my work to really be valuable. I wrote about the novels of George Lamming for my senior thesis, and learned the value of drafting and how important it is to carefully organize and communicate one’s ideas no matter how long or short the project.

I also discovered the more specific interests that I had hoped would come with further study. When developing my oral exam topics, I thought about the themes and ideas that I found provocative and most enjoyed studying in my past three years. The topics are reflective of the ideas that I think will be most relevant not only to potential future academic and professional work, but also to the way I analyze current events, and experience social and political trends for the rest of my life.
Course List

Courses for History and Literature Concentration Credit

Fall 2013

Freshman Seminar 46p: Human Rights in Peace and War
- Jacqueline Bhabha and Jennifer Leaning
- Explored the idea of “human rights”, beginning with its conception as a part of the emerging post-war international order and continuing on to consider it in the context of contemporary economic and political issues. We discussed the way that the concept has been analyzed as a tool of Western cultural and political hegemony.

Spring 2015

HL97: Sophomore Tutorial
- Kristen Roupenian and Willeke Sandler
- I studied key themes and ideas in postcolonial history and literature through an East African lens. I concluded by writing a sophomore paper and doing a small scale oral exam.

Fall 2015-Spring 2016

HL98: Junior Tutorial
- Anouska Bhattacharyya
- We spent the first semester of this tutorial developing and working through the content of our own, student-developed syllabus, writing a literature review and then concluding the experience by writing a capstone paper. I spent the second semester writing a junior paper on British police officers in the Raj.

Fall 2015

History 1042: History of US Imperialism from 1600 to 1900
- Holger Droessler
- This was a survey course of American History conducted with a focus on the ways that the United States of America could be thought of as an empire. Emphasizing the role of the state in the story of westward and overseas expansion, this course taught American history alongside theories of imperial expansion and economic development.

Spanish 71a: Continuity and Discontinuity in Colonial Latin America
- Nicole Legnani
- This class overviewed the literary and cultural production in the Americas before and after the Spanish invasion. Topics included pre-Columbian visual and verbal forms of literature; narratives of Spanish discovery and conquest, the historiography of the New World; and native depictions of the colonial world. Taught in Spanish.
Spring 2016

English 61a: Literature of Empire
- Marina Bilbija
- This class provided an overview of major literary texts produced either within the context of, or in response to, the phenomenon that was the British Empire. It introduced us to the themes and ideas common in literary productions from various time periods and geographical locations relevant to this aspect of British history, while giving us basic understandings of the historical events and contexts they arose from.

Government 1118: Political Geographies of Violence
- Alison Mountz
- This class explored the relationship between violence, space, and location. It considered how location influences how, where, and when political struggles unfold, how we define violence, and how the definitions we hold vary from one context to the next.

Fall 2016-Spring 2017

HL99: Senior Tutorial
- Rebecca Kennedy Lorenzini
- I planned and wrote a senior thesis on the literature of George Lamming, and then prepared for oral exams.

Fall 2016

History 1880: The Middle East from 1750 to 1914
- Khaled Fahmy
- This survey course covered the social, cultural, and political history of the Middle East during the century and a half preceding the First World War, the moment when the current map of the region was drawn. We began with a historical survey of the Middle East from the rise of Islam to the fifteenth century, learned about the two empires that dominated the region for the following three centuries (the Ottoman and Iranian Empires), and finally considered Europe as a rising power in the area.

English 188GF: Global Fictions
- Kelly Rich
- This course introduced the global novel in English and surveyed critical approaches to transnational literature. Specifically, it addressed issues of migration, colonialism, “new Englishes,” cosmopolitanism and globalization, the influence of religion and fundamentalism, environmental concerns, racial and sexual politics, and international kinship.

History 1457: History of American Capitalism
- Shaun Nichols
- Surveying American history from the 1600s through the 1990s, this course explored how (and why) capitalism came to be the dominant economic order in the United States. Our
course material historicized capitalism, encouraging us to think about how we should define capitalism and how it has changed over time.

Spring 2017

HL90: Cultures of Commodity Production Across the Americas
   • Frances Sullivan
   • This seminar uses social and cultural approaches to explore the history of Latin American and Caribbean commodity production, from silver to cocaine. Drawing on historical texts, poetry, fiction, and film we study the communities created by those who mined, planted, harvested, and labored in the region’s major export industries.

Non-Concentration Credit Courses

Philosophy 132: Marx and Marxism
   • Tommie Shelby
   • This course introduces the political philosophy and social theory of Karl Marx, exploring his theory of history, his account of human self-alienation, his theory of ideology, his attempt to establish that capitalism is exploitative, his critique of liberalism, and his conception of freedom. We also read and discuss some contemporary philosophical writings in the Marxist tradition.

   Topics List

Peripheral Landscapes in the Imperial Imagination

Primary
   • Sir Walter Raleigh, The Discovery of Guiana (1595).
   • Phillip Meadows Taylor, Confessions of a Thug (1839).
   • James Wyld, “Map of India: constructed with great care and research from all the latest authorities and intended more particularly to facilitate a reference to the civil and military stations” (1842).

Secondary

**The British Empire and the Development of Industrial Capitalism**

**Primary**

• The Treaty of Balta Limani (1838).
• “Report from the Committee on the state of the woollen manufacture of England” (1806).
• Oxford Union. Dr. Shashi Tharoor MP - *Britain Does Owe Reparations* (2015).

**Secondary**


**Exploring 20th Century Legal Geography**

**Primary**

• Woodrow Wilson, “Fourteen Points” (1918).

**Secondary**

• Huw Bennett, "The Mau Mau Emergency as Part of the British Army's Post-War Counter-Insurgency Experience" (2007).
• Achille Mbembé, "Necropolitics" (2003).

**Rewriting the British 19th Century Novel**

**Primary**
• Thomas Babington Macaulay, “Minute on Education” (1835).

Secondary


**Identity and Allegiance in the Context of Multi-Ethnic Empire.**

Primary

• John Jacob Thomas. *Froudacity: West Indian Fables by James Anthony Froude* (1889).
• Marcus Garvey, “The Principles of The Universal Negro Improvement Association” (1922).
• Sam Selvon, *Lonely Londoners* (1956).

Secondary

• Martha Nussbaum, “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism” (1994).

**Bibliography**

**Primary Sources**


The Husayn-McMahon Correspondence (1915-1916).

The Balfour Declaration (1917).


Albert Camus, The Stranger (1942).

British Film Institute. Hello! West Indies (1943).


George Lamming, In the Castle of My Skin (1953).

Frantz Fanon, “On Violence” in Wretched of the Earth (1961).

Perry Henzell, The Harder They Come (1972).

Wole Soyinka, Death and the King's Horseman (1975).

Jamaica Kincaid, A Small Place (1988).


Secondary Sources


Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940).


Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” (1984).


James Wyld, “Map of India: constructed with great care and research from all the latest authorities and intended more particularly to facilitate a reference to the civil and military stations” (1842).