

## Topics in British Literature: Zadie Smith's London

ENGLIT 1199, Summer 2024

Days/times/room numbers TBD

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Office Hours: TBD

Office: TBD or <https://pitt.zoom.us/j/2631099654>

### Course Description

This course will use Zadie Smith's writing as a means of interacting with London. Of all contemporary writers, there is perhaps nobody better for this task than Zadie Smith. All her novels are deeply engaged with London in some way, particularly the neighborhood of Willesden, where she was born and raised. Her essays serve as brilliant guides to the city's institutions and built environment, tracking the way it has changed since she started writing roughly 25 years ago. And she develops her thinking in conversation with other important London-based writers like Virginia Woolf and Hanif Kuriishi, encouraging readers to see the city as a site of cultural and literary history as well as a physical space.

Along with reading selections from many of Smith's works, this course will involve field trips to sites that appear in her fiction, such as Willesden (*White Teeth*, *NW*, *The Embassy of Cambodia*), Trafalgar Square (*White Teeth*), and Kenwood House (*Swing Time*). We will also visit cultural institutions such as the Tate Modern and the National Portrait Gallery to see artworks Smith writes about in essays. When we visit locations that feature in Smith's fiction or essays, our goal will not be to simply compare the "reality" of the location with the way it is depicted in Smith's fiction but to create an active dialogue between the two and gain a deeper understanding of both the literary text and the physical location as a result.

Students will be asked to write three essays during the term (3-4 pages each). One will address Smith's fiction or essays, one will arise from a student's experience in a cultural institution such as a museum or library, and one will address London's public spaces. The essays should be in dialogue with Zadie Smith's work in some way but students should feel free to interpret that as they see fit. Acceptable ways of conversing with Smith, for example, range from directly addressing her work to using it as a starting point for personal reflections or analyses. Whatever path students take, I hope that the energy and range of Smith's work will enrich student encounters with the city, and perhaps invite them to consider how literature can contribute to their experience of urban spaces more broadly.

### Course Materials

The only book required for our course is Zadie Smith's first novel, *White Teeth*. All other readings will be scanned and made available in Canvas. If you would like to buy *White Teeth* new and support a local bookstore in Pittsburgh, I recommend [White Whale Bookstore](#) in Bloomfield. If you would like to buy it used, [alibris.com](#) lists independent used booksellers across the country and often has affordable prices. On days when reading is assigned, please attend class prepared to discuss it. Please also bring a copy of the assigned text (digital or otherwise) to our conversation. I will often post questions and/or thoughts connected to the readings a few days in advance of our conversation.

On average, this course asks students to do fewer than 70 pages of reading a week. (Our emphasis will not be on reading and holding discussions in a classroom but on using our reading to interact with the city!) Because the reading is limited, I will expect students to read carefully and come to class ready to discuss the material. On days when we have field trips, I will expect students to be attentive and ready to reflect on their experience and how it relates to what we've read and discussed so far in the course.

Your reactions to some of the readings may be personal and emotional. This is usually a good thing, since emotional reactions to texts can often be the first step to thinking well about them. But emotional reactions can also be difficult to process or discuss in group settings. With this in mind, we will always strive to create a respectful atmosphere in our discussions. If you find that your reaction to the course materials or discussion prevents you from keeping up with your coursework, please let me know.

### **Writing**

Students will be asked to complete three, 3-4-page writing assignments during the term. One of the essays will address Smith's fiction or essays, one will arise from a student's experience in a cultural institution such as a museum or gallery, and one will address London's public space. I will ask that all of them be in dialogue with Zadie Smith's work in some way but students should feel free to interpret that as they see fit. Acceptable ways of conversing with Smith, for example, range from directly addressing her work to using it as a starting point for personal reflections or analyses. I will provide prompts for each assignment at least one week before the essays are due.

Students will also be asked to complete several short in-class reflections. Prompts for the in-class reflections will be provided as we go.

### **Grading**

The point of this course is to use Zadie Smith's writing to interact with London in a meaningful way. Instead of providing a rubric or a set of quantifiable expectations to assess how well students have achieved this goal, we will use **consultative grading** to determine grades in our class. At the end of week 3, I will ask students to submit a short (1-page) reflection on their performance in the course and goals for the remainder of the term. We will also discuss a provisional grade for the course at that point. At the end of the semester, students will turn in another short reflection in which they assess their work and how well they've achieved their goals. Students will also propose a final grade for themselves, based on conversations and work throughout the term.

The point of this grading system is to allow for students to engage in their work in different ways, and to feel comfortable thinking and writing more freely than they might if each assignment came with a set of expectations that students needed to meet. I hope that this method of approaching grades will allow students to think more deeply about the assignment's content and take risks or experiment in their writing. But I also know that grades matter for graduate school, scholarships, jobs, and many other reasons, and that having some structure for self-assessment can help students get the most out of their work in our class.

With that in mind, here is a description of what I think "A" level looks like with regards to attendance, participation, and writing assignments:

- Attendance: attending all of the classes and letting me know ahead of time (within reason) if you need to be late.

- Participation: consistently contributing to classroom discussion, whether by offering thoughtful comments or active listening. (To be clear: this means that students should not feel pressure to speak during class! People contribute to groups in different ways, and while I have found that closely following a discussion frequently results in offering comments to it, this need not always be the case.)
- Written work (including self-reflections): submitting thoughtful, carefully crafted work that has been developed in dialogue with relevant texts and/or classroom conversation and letting me know ahead of time if you need to extend a deadline.

Students who do work that can be described with language like this should propose grades in the A range. If students decide to assess their work with a B, C, or D range grade, it will likely be because they didn't manage some or much of what is described above. A grade of A+ represents extraordinary work that goes above and beyond expectations in some way. All of this can and should be part of students' self-reflections and mid-term conversations.

Finally: I am always happy to talk about grades! As I said above, I know they matter. If not having grades creates unwanted stress, if you need to get a certain grade in our class, or if there is some other reason you would like more information about your grade throughout the semester, please let me know. I'm happy to talk about it, just as I'm happy to talk about other issues or questions that students have about the class.

### **Statement on Generative AI Writing Tools**

Artificial intelligence is a part of all our lives: autocorrect when we text, autofill when we write emails, Grammarly when we compose essays. These technologies have existed for years without humanities professors thinking they threaten the way they teach. But new generative AI writing tools such as ChatGPT, GrammarlyGO, and others, are a different story. Just to cite one example: Corey Robin, a well-known political science professor at Brooklyn College recently wrote that he had decided to assign only in-class essays because it was the only way for him to ensure that his students were doing the work of writing. (Essay available through PittCat if you would like to read it but are paywalled.)

In this class, we will still write take-home essays. I will even go so far as to tell you that I think there are ways that generative AI can be used ethically and helpfully in your writing. In conversations about AI, I have heard other scholars and writers describe using AI to help begin their research in ways that seem helpful and ethical to me. (Used in this limited way, it does not seem much different from Wikipedia, just to take one example.) I will say more about this in class, but if you would like to use AI in a similar way in our class, please feel free.

At the same time, please know that there are plenty of unethical ways of using AI. Using AI to analyze texts, structure thoughts, or shape your responses to a piece of writing, for example, are violations of academic integrity and will be penalized as such if they are discovered. You are the author of your work for the course and authorship means you take responsibility for your words and claims, regardless of which tools you use. Please see me if you have any questions about this policy.

## Schedule

### Week 1

Class 1

**Read (in class):**

- Zadie Smith, "Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction"
- Zadie Smith, "Intimations"

*In-class:* Course introduction; introduction to Zadie Smith's biography and literary influences (particularly E.M. Forster and Hanif Kureishi)

Class 2

**Read:**

- Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*, 1-69
- Zadie Smith, "Accidental Hero" (in Canvas)
- Zadie Smith, "This Is How It Feels To Me" (In Canvas)
- James Wood, "Tell Me How Does it Feel" (In Canvas)

*In-class:* Discuss *White Teeth*, its background, reception, and depiction of Willesden

### Week 2

Class 3

**Read:**

- Zadie Smith, "The Embassy of Cambodia" (in Canvas)
- Anthony Veasna So, "Superking Son Scores Again" (in Canvas)

*In-class:* Discuss "Embassy of Cambodia"; compare with Veasna So's story; compare its portrayals of Willesden with those in *White Teeth*

Class 4

**Read:**

- None

*In-class:* **Field Trip to Willesden Local History Society** for walking tour and/or presentation

### Week 3

Class 5

**Read:**

- Zadie Smith, *Swing Time*, 102-114 (in Canvas)
- Zadie Smith, "Alte Frau by Balthasar Denner"
- John Berger, selections from *Ways of Seeing*

*In-class:* Discuss Smith and Berger's approach to visual art and museums; discuss Smith's scene in Kenwood House from *Swing Time*

Class 6

**Read:**

- None

*In-class: Field Trip to Kenwood House* in Hampstead Heath

#### **Week 4**

Class 7

**Read:**

- Zadie Smith, “A Bird of a Few Words: Narrative Mysteries in the Paintings of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye” (in Canvas)

*In-class: Field Trip to the Tate Modern Museum* to view Lynette Yiadom-Boakye’s work

Class 8

**Read:**

- An Interview with Zadie Smith and Toyin Ojih-Odutola by Katy Hessel
- Zadie Smith, “Toyin Ojih-Odutola’s Visions of Power” (in Canvas)

*In-class: Field Trip to the National Portrait Gallery* to see Toyin Ojih-Odutola’s portrait of Zadie Smith

#### **Week 5**

Class 9

**Read:**

- Zadie Smith, “Northwest London Blues” (in Canvas)
- Zadie Smith, “Fences: A Brexit Diary” (in Canvas)
- Zadie Smith, “On Optimism and Despair” (in Canvas)
- Zadie Smith, “Grand Union” (in Canvas)

*In-class:* Discuss Smith’s account of neoliberal public space in London

Class 10

**Read:**

- Virginia Woolf, “Street Haunting: A London Adventure” (in Canvas)
- Zadie Smith, *NW*, 359-385 (in Canvas)
- **Optional:** Virginia Woolf, “Character in Fiction” (in Canvas)

*In-class:* Compare London walks in Smith and Woolf’s work; take our own London walks

#### **Week 6**

Class 11

**Read:**

- Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*, 341-448

*In-class:* Discuss *White Teeth*’s conclusion; **possible field trip to Trafalgar Square**

Class 12

**Read:**

- TBD

*In-class:* Conclusions

## **University Policies**

### **Gender-Inclusive Language Guidelines**

Aspiring to create a learning environment in which people of all identities are encouraged to contribute their perspectives to academic discourse, the University of Pittsburgh Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies Program provides guidelines and resources regarding gender-inclusive/non-sexist language ([gsws.pitt.edu/node/1432](https://gsws.pitt.edu/node/1432)). Following these guidelines fosters an inclusive and welcoming environment, strengthens academic writing, enriches discussion, and reflects best professional practices.

Language is gender-inclusive and non-sexist when we use words that affirm and respect how people describe, express, and experience their gender. Gender-inclusive/non-sexist language acknowledges people of any gender (e.g. first-year student versus freshman, chair versus chairman, humankind versus mankind). It also affirms non-binary gender identifications, and recognizes the difference between biological sex and gender expression. Students may share their preferred pronouns and names, and these gender identities and gender expressions should be honored.

These guidelines fulfill the best intentions of the University of Pittsburgh's Non-Discrimination Policy: <https://www.cfo.pitt.edu/policies/policy/07/07-01-03.html>

Source: <http://www.gsws.pitt.edu/node/1643>.

### **The Writing Center**

The Writing Center is a valuable resource for writers at Pitt. It will still operate during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although consultants do not correct, edit, or proofread papers, they can teach you strategies for organizing, editing, and revising your writing. You can meet with a consultant once or regularly over the course of the semester. In some cases, your teacher may send you to the Writing Center for help on a particular problem; otherwise, you can seek assistance on your own. Their services are free. You can browse the services they offer or make an appointment by visiting [www.writingcenter.pitt.edu](http://www.writingcenter.pitt.edu).

### **Academic Integrity**

Cheating/plagiarism will not be tolerated. Students suspected of violating the University of Pittsburgh Policy on Academic Integrity, noted below, will be required to participate in the outlined procedural process as initiated by the instructor. A minimum sanction of a zero score for the quiz, exam or paper will be imposed. (For the full Academic Integrity policy, go to [www.provost.pitt.edu/info/ai1.html](http://www.provost.pitt.edu/info/ai1.html).)

In addition, the English Department does not allow an assignment, in part or in its entirety, to fulfill the requirements of more than one course. If a student plans to substantially revise an assignment from one course to fulfill the requirements of a subsequent course, the student must first ask permission of the instructor who will receive the revision.

### **Disability Resource Services Statement**

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both your instructor and the Office of Disability Resources and Services, 140 William Pitt Union, 412-648-7890, as early as possible in the term. Disability Resources and Services will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

### **Email Communication Policy Statement**

Each student is issued a University e-mail address (username@pitt.edu) upon admittance. This e-mail

address may be used by the University for official communication with students. Students are expected to read e-mail sent to this account on a regular basis. Failure to read and react to University communications in a timely manner does not absolve the student from knowing and complying with the content of the communications. The University provides an e-mail forwarding service that allows students to read their e-mail via other service providers (e.g., Hotmail, AOL, Yahoo). Students that choose to forward their e-mail from their pitt.edu address to another address do so at their own risk. If e-mail is lost as a result of forwarding, it does not absolve the student from responding to official communications sent to their University e-mail address. To forward e-mail sent to your University account, go to <http://accounts.pitt.edu>, log into your account, click on Edit Forwarding Addresses, and follow the instructions on the page. Be sure to log out of your account when you have finished. (For the full E-mail Communication Policy, go to [www.bc.pitt.edu/policies/policy/09/09-10-01.html](http://www.bc.pitt.edu/policies/policy/09/09-10-01.html).)