

Institution: Newman University
Unit of Assessment: 29 – English Language and Literature
Title of case study: Contemporary literature and discourses of race and identity
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Research findings inform lectures delivered to educators in English in the local region: both serving teachers and their pupils (Further Education) and PGCE Secondary English students undertaking their school placements locally, and often gaining employment within the Midlands. The impact is in how the teachers use literary texts to engage more effectively with their pupils regarding notions of race and ‘Otherness’; to develop a tolerant attitude towards those perceived as different; and to be cognisant of the pitfalls in teaching ‘texts from different cultures and traditions’, as stipulated by the English National Curriculum, which might reinforce wider social discourses of ‘Otherness’ around race.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>This research primarily aims to establish the paradigms of home and belonging expressed by Black British writers and how this relates to discourses of race in the UK. All of the research undertaken by Cousins (the key researcher in this case study) is underpinned by an assumption that literature is socially important; hence the persistent strand through the research has been to consider how literature operates within a social context. This is true of her early PhD work on African literature and its contributions towards an African feminist theory; however, since 2009, the focus of the research has shifted towards a UK context, and to the conjunctions between race and society in contemporary literature. Two areas of interest have emerged in this work: firstly, the core work into Black British women writers and how they are establishing a sense of belonging within an English cultural context. A second, related area has emerged through thinking about non-academic UK arenas where literature might prompt discussions around race and society. This has developed into work on the reception of popular postcolonial literature, discussed in the context of reading groups – mass media (for example the Richard and Judy Book Club (Channel 4, then Watch 2001-2009 as part of the Richard and Judy daytime ‘magazine’ show) and also those set up locally by groups of friends or neighbours (as discussed, for example, in Jenny Hartley’s <i>Reading Groups</i> (2001)).</p> <p>The research so far has concentrated on writers of direct African descent (not via the Caribbean) raised in England. The findings so far suggest the writers’ are committed to an engagement with current debates in the UK over immigration, cultural tolerance, and national identity. Whilst not ignoring the alienation, fragmentation and, at times, violence experienced by members of immigrant communities in Britain, they also assert their own sense that such communities do ‘belong’ – and that English identities need to be reshaped in order to accommodate that belonging. The writers use different strategies to assert this: firstly, they often rewrite English history to incorporate the long presence of Black people of African descent in England. Secondly, they experiment aesthetically using forms associated with the English literary tradition such as the Gothic and blank verse which starts to rework the material basis of English culture as expressed in the literary canon. Thirdly, by interrogating the different ways of belonging – to a family, a local community, a wider society, an ethnic group, a nation – they question an apparently benign discourse of multiculturalism which elides the underpinning racially white norm of a national identity.</p> <p>Discourses are created through the interpretation of what is written (in texts of all kinds) hence more recent research seeks to explore the reception of widely read novels such as those promoted through mass media book clubs (for example <i>Half of a Yellow Sun</i> promoted through the Richard and Judy Book Club) or those which gain popularity through the more informal ‘word-of-mouth’ recommendations which develop in reading communities (e.g. <i>The Other Hand</i>). It uses online forums, book blogs, reviews and other media sources to start to investigate that reception.</p>

Impact case study (REF3b)

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Helen Cousins. 2012. 'Helen Oyeyemi and the Yoruba Gothic: *White is for Witching*.' *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 47 (1): pp. 47-58

Helen Cousins. 2012. 'Unplaced/Invaded: Multiculturalism in Helen Oyeyemi's *The Opposite House*.' *Postcolonial Text* 7 (3). <http://postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/issue/view/39>

Helen Cousins. 2011. 'A Good Authentic Read: Exoticism in the Postcolonial Novels of the Richard and Judy Book Club.' In Jenni Ramone and Helen Cousins (eds.) *The Richard and Judy Book Club Reader: Popular Texts and the Practices of Reading*. Ashgate: pp. 137-153

Helen Cousins and Jenni Ramone. 2013. 'Negotiating the Local: Literary Prizes and Reading Groups.' Lecture given at the Contemporary Women's Writing Association Symposium *Contemporary Women's Writing and Literary Prize Culture*. 24 June, Leeds Metropolitan University.

<http://www.the-cwwa.org/2013/04/25/contemporary-womens-writing-and-literary-prize-culture-24th-june-2013/>

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The impact of this research can be measured in two contexts: the first is a lecture given at several Sixth Form Conferences run by the English subject area at Newman University; the second is a guest lecture given each year to PGCE Secondary English students at Newman University. Both these lectures are delivered by Cousins.

The Sixth Form Conference lecture has been developed from research findings and draws in particular on the work done for the article in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. The theme of the conference was 'The Gothic' as this is one of the topic areas in the AQA A-level literature specification. The lecture took 'vampires' as its theme as the article in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* was based around a contemporary novel featuring a vampire and it drew on theories of 'reverse colonisation' as developed by Daniel Arata in relation to *Dracula*. Part of the lecture, explored the rise of the Gothic in relation to colonisation and discussed how the same notions of the 'foreign' outsider/invaser informed much discourse around immigration in contemporary England.

The lecture was delivered at four Sixth Form Conferences: 2 July 2010, 11 March 2011, 15 November 2011, 20 November 2012. Records of attendance are available from March 2011:

- 11 March 2011 – 175 pupils from 14 schools in the West Midlands;
- 15 November 2011 – 139 pupils from 7 schools in the West Midlands;
- 20 November 2012 – 191 pupils from 14 schools in the West Midland and 1 school in East Midlands.
- As some schools have attended more than once with different groups of students (sometimes accompanied by different teachers), this totals: 31 schools and 30 teachers; the total number of pupils is 505.

To assess impact, teachers were emailed in February 2013 to ask them: how it changed aspects of their teaching of this topic; how it helped them to rethink some of the concepts around 'gothic' and 'literature'; any other ways it helped them to develop the topic with students. Four teachers responded: their comments included:

- 'a useful resource'; 'reinforced and introduced what they were covering'; 'Look at Vampires was good – gave a different perspective – it was good to look at it from the point of popular culture and changes in perspective over time'; 'Students had also commented that they had found it useful' (Rachel Danks, Head of English, Rugby High School 06/03/2013).

Impact case study (REF3b)

- 'We loved the conference. Good venue, the right length, engaging presentations. The students found it of use in getting them to think about wider implications for their Gothic coursework, particularly the Y13s who were studying it last Term and who this Term will have to submit their 3000 word coursework (cf OCR Literature, Unit F664) I'll have more idea on the value of that impact after I've read their studies. Meanwhile for the Y12s it was an excellent taster of what is to come when they study Gothic and a great insight into HE experience' (James Phillips, Baxter College 13/02/2013).
- 'We are teaching the topic far more broadly, including 'modern gothic' to help students relate to the ideas/themes/symbolism of more traditional gothic'; 'Our students were fascinated that there is more to 'literature' than just the canon, so it did open their eyes to thinking a little more about what is around them! I think .the refreshing approach made symbolism and motifs of the gothic more accessible in older texts for our students' (Michelle Prince, Leek High School 10/02/2013).

The research also underpins a guest lecture delivered to students on the Secondary English PGCE at Newman University. This lecture has been delivered annually since 2009. The lecture discusses how students might deliver the part of the curriculum to do with teaching 'texts from different cultures and traditions'. Considering how the notion of different cultures might operate in different secondary school class rooms, the session asks students how they might counter normative ideas about different cultures through teaching literature, and hence the labelling of certain texts and authors as outsiders. It discusses how students can counter negative stereotypes in schools regarding 'difference' in racial/cultural terms. These students go on to take work in schools across the Midlands and further afield. The partnership office – who administers the programme – have only been keeping record of students' destination in the last two years:

- 2010 entry cohort (15 in total) one was employed in Manchester, the rest in the Midlands;
- 2011 entry cohort (20 students) two were employed outside of the Midlands in Cambridge and Bradford.

To assess the impact of these lectures, the current 2012 entry cohort were surveyed using a short answer questionnaire. These asked: what new understandings or ideas did you take from the session; how did this/would this change your practices in teaching texts from different cultures and traditions; any other comments? There were 15 responses.

- In response to question one, had allowed the students to think more about the 'perceptions people have with regards to culture and traditions [...] young people in particular'; and it allowed them to appreciate the 'struggles and challenges that we, as practitioners, will face when teaching texts from other cultures'. They showed an appreciation, as people who will influence a younger generation, that teaching this aspect of the National Curriculum for English with the ideas discussed in the lecture, 'tackles racism in today's society' and that it gave pupils a 'gateway to explore the world via literature'.
- In response to the second question, students felt that the most important difference in their practice, would be to include context about the texts: for example, 'giving more background information'; 'use images and resources to enable students [pupils] to build an idea of the themes and issues'; 'ensuring that cultures and traditions are explored in detail beforehand'. The session had also given the students confidence to 'teach these texts with more awareness of the class [the different cultural backgrounds in the group]' and to be 'culturally sensitive'. One student appreciated the message that they 'could approach the topic whilst being sensitive to other's views and cultures' whilst another felt it had helped in exploring ways of 'addressing different cultures in a positive manner'. It also encouraged them to 'relate [texts] to current issues'.
- In the third response, students indicated that beyond being an enjoyable and interesting session, it was also 'inspirational' and 'needed'. It had enthused some of the students to incorporate 'a variety of texts from other cultures into [their] classroom' and to make links with other parts of the curriculum such as PHSE.

Impact case study (REF3b)**5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

1. Attendance data for 'The Gothic' Sixth Form Conferences, held by the Marketing Office at Newman University.
2. Emails from teachers who attended the 'Gothic' Sixth Form Conference.
3. First school of employment data for PGCE Secondary English students, held by the Partnership Office at Newman University.
4. Questionnaire responses from PGCE secondary English students 2012 Entry cohort.