ENGL 673: Topics in Transnational Literature and Culture
“The Contemporary Cosmopolitan Novel”
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*Fulfils the “Concepts, Issues, or Themes” and “English without Borders” distribution areas.

Course Description:
To be cosmopolitan is to be a citizen of the world—suggesting ethical and political commitments to global others, commitments that are often understood as developing out of mobility and the resulting interaction with various kinds of difference. In his essay “Cosmopolitan Reading,” K. Anthony Appiah argues that “the novel [is] a testing ground for a distinction between cosmopolitanism, with its emphasis on a dialogue among differences, and a different more monological form of humanism” (207). Yet Bruce Robbins and many postcolonial critics of cosmopolitanism resist constructions of cosmopolitanism like Appiah’s where “the term cosmopolitanism is ordinarily taken to [refer to] aesthetic spectatorship rather than political engagement” (Robbins, Feeling Global 17). Appiah’s and Robbins’ different takes on what cosmopolitan world-views consist of and what the goal of these world-views should be point to a tension that undergirds a good deal of writing about cosmopolitanism: is it a principally aesthetic or political category? But is it possible to imagine/ theorize a politically engaged cosmopolitanism that also takes seriously questions of aesthetics? Can genres such as the novel prompt responsible cosmopolitan world-views?

This course will consider these ideas by examining contemporary novels that consider how cosmopolitanism might address questions of ethical and political commitments to other people throughout the globe. We will read texts set in a variety of national locations and in different kinds of environments, and written by authors from a variety of different backgrounds. Indeed, not all of these texts—despite their various depictions/ theorizations of cosmopolitan world-views—believe that a responsible cosmopolitan world-view is possible at all. One of the ways we will begin to approach these novels is by reading articles by a variety of cosmopolitan theorists to provide ourselves with a shared vocabulary & theoretical framework from which to work with & against. Questions we will consider include: how do these novels engage the concept of cosmopolitanism? Who is allowed to hold cosmopolitan world-views in these novels? How are cosmopolitan world-views developed? What are the conditions of possibility for cosmopolitanism? How and to what extent might reading facilitate the development of cosmopolitan politics? We will move on to read two novels that, arguably, established the popularity/ notoriety of the cosmopolitan novel: The Satanic Verses (1988) and The English Patient (1992). From there we move to more recent iterations of the cosmopolitan novel. This transition will allow us to attend to the ongoing development of the contemporary cosmopolitan novel and query the changing representation of and attitudes towards cosmopolitanism.

Readings to be chosen from the following: