

## **The Personal is Political: The American Essay Tradition**

Freshman Seminar

Monday / Wednesday, 9am-12:15pm

Prof. Greta LaFleur

Summer 2017

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Office Hours: Tues/Thurs 10:30-11:30am, or by appointment

*'Essay' is a verb, not just a noun; 'essaying' is a process. --John d'Agata*

*The essay is personal. --Cynthia Ozick*

This seminar offers students the opportunity to explore the American essay tradition, offering students the opportunity to engage with some of its earliest moments as well as to some of its most recent iterations. As a genre of nonfictional writing, the essay form brings together a number of different types of writing that many of us encounter on a fairly regular basis: newspaper articles, sermons, speeches, and political treatises, to only name a few. Over the course of the past 200 years, the essay in all of its manifold forms has become one of the most recognizable vehicles for both personal and political thought, and remains a powerful rhetorical tool for disseminating established ideas and experimenting with new ones. In this course, we will consider the essay as a historically-specific mode of communication; a literary form or genre that has changed over time; a mode of political expression that has been strategically mobilized in particular times, and in particular ways; and as a species of rhetoric. While we will explore the work of canonical or “classic” American writers such as Benjamin Franklin and Henry David Thoreau, we will direct the lion’s share of our efforts toward essays written over the past 150 years, tracking the essay tradition as it evolved and has been put to new uses during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Students will be expected to complete a wide range of types of assignments, from developing collectively-authored manifestos to writing personal essays, from drafting literary analyses of particular essays to crafting political essays themselves. In this course, we will read essays that address an incredibly broad range of topics, including rebellion and political revolution; queer and feminist politics; the ways that American history bears the potential to both empower and harm us; sexual politics; contemporary American racism and strategies for anti-racist resistance; the challenges of gentrification and changing urban cultural landscapes; the vicissitudes of representation in popular culture; the promises and disappointments of our ever-changing relationships to technology, and many more. Authors we may consider include Thomas Paine, Claudia Rankine, Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Delany, Michel de Montaigne, Joan Didion, Virginia Woolf, James Baldwin, Amber Hollibaugh, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Sherman Alexie, Hilton Als, Esther Newton, and many more.

### **Assignments**

- Two Short Essays, 5-pages each (25% apiece; 50% total)
- In-Class Presentation (25%)
- Final Seminar Paper of 8-10 pages (25%)

### **Required Texts**

- Phillip Lopate, ed. *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present* (ISBN 9780385422987)
- Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (ISBN 978-1555976903)
- Claudia Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (ISBN 978-1555974077)

All required texts are available at the Yale Bookstore at 77 Broadway St, New Haven, CT 06511. They are also widely available new and used online, and all are also available via the library system (either in Yale's own collections or through Borrow Direct or ILL).

## **COURSE POLICIES**

### *Coming to Class Prepared*

Please note that part of your class participation is making sure that you have the required books for the class, and bringing the necessary book(s) to every class.

### *Acceptable Use of Electronic Readers*

Readers (such as Kindles, Nooks, etc) are acceptable, but please come and see me about making sure that you are able to get e-books that include page numbers. iPhones and other smart phones are *not* acceptable “readers.”

## **LATE WORK**

Late work is unacceptable. Technical difficulties are not a valid excuse. If you are having problems with your computer, printer, or Canvas, please bring a hand-written draft of the assignment. I will accept late work until 5pm, one week later. So, for example, if an assignment is due in-class on Wednesday, May 31<sup>st</sup>, I will accept the assignment up to but no later than 5pm on Wednesday, June 7th. After 5pm one week later, I will simply not accept the assignment, and you will receive a 0% as a grade.

There are penalties for turning in late work. I will deduct one half grade (5 percentage points) from your assignment grade for each day that it comes in late. So, for example, if you turn in a paper that receives the grade of a B (85%), but you turn it in three days late (on a Friday), your final grade becomes a C- (70%). Remember, even an F (55%) is better than taking a 0%. It is in your best interest to turn in your work on time.

## **ATTENDANCE**

This is an extremely short, five-week course. You will be allowed one absence from class no questions asked; any additional unexcused absences will cost you 1/3 of a letter grade on your final grade. If you must miss class for religious observance, athletic trip or official extra-curricular event, please let me know at the beginning of the term and those absences will be excused. If you become seriously ill or if a personal or family emergency will cause you to miss more than two classes, please let me know as soon as possible. If you miss class on a day when a paper is due, you are responsible for turning in your work on time via email, or for contacting me before class and making alternate arrangements to otherwise submit the assignment. Tardiness is similarly unacceptable; two tardies of more than 5 minutes will be counted as an absence.

## **GRADING SCALE:**

A+	98-100
A	94-97
A-	90-93
B+	87-89
B	84-86
B-	80-83
C+	77-79
C	74-76
C-	70-73
D+	67-69
D	60-66
F	59 and below

### **HANDOUTS AND ARTICLES POSTED ON Canvas**

You will be responsible for printing out and bringing to class those articles that are assigned and posted on Canvas, unless I specify otherwise. You will also be responsible for keeping in your possession any material handed out in class.

### **DICTIONARY**

Make sure to have a good dictionary by your side while reading the assigned material. If you do not have one, you should use (frequently!) Yale’s subscription to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), which is available online through the library website <http://www.oed.com/>

### **CANVAS**

This course is registered on Canvas, Yale’s online course management system. To access your account, go to <http://canvas.yale.edu/> and login; then click the tab with the course number in the upper, left-hand corner. You will be able to use Canvas to access the class syllabus, some of the readings, and assignments.

### **ASSIGNMENTS**

#### **In-Class Presentation (25% of final grade)**

Students will offer one, 10-minute (but no more! I will be timing) presentation to the class during the semester, that draws out a theme or themes from the readings assigned for that day. The intention of this assignment is to create an opportunity for students to hone their oral presentation skills.

#### **Short Essays (25% apiece; 50% total of final grade)**

Students will write two, 5 page short essays throughout the semester:

- ONE short piece of literary analysis.
- ONE “lyric essay.”

#### **Final Essay (25% of final grade)**

The final essay will be a 8-10 page literary analysis essay on a topic of your choice that will incorporate a minimum of five outside critical sources. It must be double-spaced, size 12 Times New Roman font, standard margins (1.25 on left and right, 1 inch on top and bottom), with proper MLA citation. The topic that you choose must address one or more of the course readings.

### **SUBMITTING ASSIGNMENTS**

All written assignments must be submitted to Canvas on the day that it is due (under the “Assignments” tab), and a hard copy must be turned in to me in class during our next course meeting. Even if you submit it via hard copy in class, you must submit a copy to Canvas as well. Please submit your documents in Microsoft Word “.doc” or “.docx” files. If you use OpenOffice.org to write your assignments, please make sure to save them in one of the above formats, although I will also accept “.rtf” files. If you submit your essay in a file format that I cannot access, I will consider it late or missing and you will be penalized accordingly.

### **EMAIL ETIQUETTE**

My email policy is simple: email me if you have questions about the class that cannot be answered by the syllabus or your peers. Emailing your instructor is a genre of formal correspondence. Do not address me with "Hey," or not at all; "Dear Greta," however, is always an appropriate way to start an email. I will reply to emails within 24 hours, unless they ask for information that was offered in class or is available on the syllabus.

### **CELL PHONE ETIQUETTE**

Cell phones are not to be used during class. They should be turned off or put on silent (not vibrate) before students enter the classroom, and placed in a closed bag or purse once class begins. Texting or receiving calls during class is unacceptable; it is disrespectful to both your instructor and your peers. Any student found texting or otherwise using their cell phone during class will be marked absent for the class.

### **LAPTOPS**

Laptops are not to be used in class. I will make an exception for students with disabilities who need the use of laptops for note-taking purposes; these students must bring in a note justifying their use of a laptop in class. This policy is not about surveilling or controlling you, but rather, comes from the fact that in my experience as a teacher, I have come to believe that laptops constitute both a physical (screens between students and each other, and students and the professor) and psychological distraction that, more often than not, hinders students from connecting to their peers, the discussion, and me. Again, if you have a disability that makes the use of a laptop in class a necessity, that is absolutely fine and I will make every accommodation for you; please just come see me.

### **CLASSROOM ETIQUETTE**

#### **Interacting with your classmates**

“The Personal is Political” is a discussion-based course, and we will spend a great deal of time during class participating in guided discussions of the essays that we will be reading. The following are some basic suggestions for how to engage in class discussion.

- Always ground your comments in the readings. It is an extremely important scholarly skill to be able to refer back to the text—readings from the current week, past weeks, or other relevant material you have come across in your studies—to ground your point. Even if your feelings or reactions to the issue at hand come from personal experience, find points in the readings, or in your classmates’ ideas, with which your reaction resonates (or doesn’t resonate).
- There is often no “wrong” or “right” way to read the texts that we’ll be reading, but rather, positions or approaches that we can take to better understand different modes of representation. I encourage students to try to engage with each reading and each other sympathetically, which means to read with an open mind, and a commitment to understanding the foundations of each other’s ideas and arguments.
- Listen to each other, don’t simply wait to speak. We are all here to learn together and from each other; you do not come to class to simply listen to and learn from the instructor. If you disagree with something that your peer says, politely and clearly state that you disagree, and why.
- Remember that representation is rarely reality. The essays that we will be exploring in this class will not always or often offer direct, universal, or even accurate reflections of reality. These representations will sometimes even exist in much closer proximity to what we now think of as “propaganda” than any sort of objective analysis, although they will certainly *claim* to be an objective analysis. Our goal is to consider these representations within the intellectual, cultural, and overall geopolitical context in which they were produced, consumed, and circulated.
- Conflict: in a class like “The Personal is Political,” it is likely that we will experience conflict. If something a classmate (or professor!) says offends you, please engage with them clearly, firmly, and respectfully (e.g. “I prefer that you not use that word. Would you be willing to say XXXX instead in the future?”). Similarly, if a classmate or professor asks you to reconsider a way that you are speaking or acting, try not to immediately get defensive. Try to listen to your peer/professor, consider what they are saying, consider your speech/behavior, and decide whether or not you are willing to act or speak differently. Our classroom is a mini-community, and I encourage all students to join me in a practice of “calling in” rather than “calling out,” in order that we can learn with each other via mutual support, accountability, and kindness rather than shame and silencing. For more on “calling in,” see:  
<http://www.blackgirldangerous.org/2013/12/calling-less-disposable-way-holding-accountable/>

### **ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

*Definitions of Plagiarism, Cheating, and Documentation of Sources*  
From the Yale College Undergraduate Regulations, 2013-14

By coming to Yale, students have implicitly asked the College to help them develop a broadly based, highly disciplined intelligence, not just to learn material, but also to be guided toward a deep and supple understanding of the subjects they study. Course readings, lectures, and discussions are all crucial elements of this learning. Less obvious, perhaps, is what students’ own writing contributes to this process. It may sometimes seem that exams, lab reports, and papers

are meant primarily to measure how much has been learned. But when students complete written course work, they are not demonstrating what they have learned, but are rather doing the very work of synthesis and reflection that constitutes advanced learning. Every writer has had the experience of making discoveries while writing an essay. To have this discovery is to make knowledge, and making knowledge is what joins all students to the project of the university.

Those students who cheat forfeit the opportunity to make such discoveries. Certainly there are other reasons not to cheat. One who borrows unacknowledged ideas or language from others is stealing their work, which denies them their due credit and also impedes that free exchange of ideas on which the university depends. Yale regards cheating as a serious offense, for which the standard penalty is two semesters of suspension. But the much more grievous wrong is to the cheating student. Writing is one of the most powerful sites of learning; students who turn in someone else’s work, therefore, are giving away the very substance of their educations.

College course work frequently requires that students build on previous scholarship or collaborate with other students. The following definitions help clarify the proper procedures for conducting and documenting such collaborations and the expectations of Yale College. For a fuller discussion of these issues, see the Writing Center website.

### **TUTORING CENTER**

If you find yourself struggling in my course, please come see me. In addition to any help I can give you, Yale also offers tutoring services. Please see the website for additional information: <http://yalecollege.yale.edu/content/tutoring-and-academic-support#3>

### **THE WRITING CENTER**

Students are encouraged to take advantage of Yale’s wonderful writing center. Many students tend to avoid the Writing Center, thinking that it is a resource for “bad” writers. This is not the case! The best writers know that feedback, revision and review is a *crucial* part of the writing process. The Writing Center is a wonderful resource—please use it! You can make an appointment with a writing center staff member online at <https://www.yalewco.com/index.php>

### **FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

The Resource Office on Disabilities works with all students at the University to include Yale College, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and all Professional Schools. Registering with the Resource Office on Disabilities is a required first step for students who wish to request a disability related accommodation or service. Students must contact the Resource Office and meet with the Director to discuss accommodation(s). Appropriate documentation is required and will be discussed with the student.

A student may register and submit documentation to the Resource Office even though a specific accommodation request is not anticipated at the time of registration.

Documentation provided to the Resource Office on Disabilities is kept confidential. Information submitted directly to the Resource Office will not become part of a student's permanent record at Yale.

Students who are unsure about their eligibility for assistance from the Resource Office should schedule an appointment with the director of the Resource Office on Disabilities.

For more information, please see the Resource Office on Disabilities website:

<http://yalecollege.yale.edu/content/student-information>

Resource Office on Disabilities  
Yale University  
35 Broadway (rear entrance), Room 222  
P.O. Box 208305  
New Haven, CT 06520-8305  
Phone: 203-432-2324  
Fax: 203-432-8250

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

### **WEEK ONE:**

#### **5/29: Introduction to the Course**

- Introductions
- Go over syllabus
- Short reading assignment and discussion (from handout in class)
- Joan Didion, “On Keeping a Notebook” \*Canvas (6 pages)
- John d’Agata and Deborah Tall, “The Lyric Essay.” \*Canvas

#### **5/31: Introduction to the Form**

- Adorno, “The Essay as Form.” (21 pages) \*Canvas
- Jeff Porter, “A History and Poetics of the Essay” \*Canvas
- Lopate, “Introduction” to *The Art of the Essay (APE)*
- Joan Didion, “In Bed.” (*APE* 689-692) (3 pages)
- Sally Tisdale, “We Do Abortions Here.” \*Canvas

### **WEEK TWO:**

#### **6/5: The Essay Tradition**

- Michel de Montaigne, “Of Books” (*APE* 46-56) (10 pages)
- Michel de Montaigne, “Of a Monstrous Child,” (*APE* 57-58)
- Michel de Montaigne, “Of Vain Subtleties” \*Canvas
- Michel de Montaigne, “Of Smells” \*Canvas
- Joan Didion, “Goodbye to All That.” (*APE* 681-689)
- Eula Biss, “Goodbye to All That.” \*Canvas (18 pages)

#### **6/7: Early America and the Essay**

- Benjamin Franklin, “Information for Those Who Would Remove to America.” \*Canvas
- Franklin, “Rules by Which a Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One.” \*Canvas
- Henry David Thoreau, “Walking” (*APE* 480-506) (26 pages)

**ESSAY #1 DUE TO CANVAS BY FRIDAY, JUNE 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017 by 5pm; Hard Copy Must Be Submitted in Class on 6/12**

**WEEK THREE:**

**6/12: Early America, Revisited**

- Sherman Alexie, “Captivity” \*Canvas
- Mary Rowlandson, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* \*Canvas

**6/14: The Political Essay**

- Frederick Douglass, “What, to the Slave, is the Fourth of July?” (1852) \*Canvas (19 pages)
- Apess, “An Indian’s Looking-Glass for the White Man” (1833). \*Canvas (4 pages)
- W.E.B. DuBois, “The Forethought.” \*Canvas (all one doc) (1903)
- W.E.B. DuBois, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings.” \*Canvas (all one doc) (1903)
- W.E.B. DuBois, “Of the Passing of the First Born” \*Canvas (all one doc) (1903)
- Eula Biss, “Time and Distance Overcome.” \*Canvas (2008)

**WEEK FOUR:**

**6/19: Mid-Century**

- James Baldwin, “In Search of a Majority.” (7 pages) \*Canvas
- James Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son.” (*APE* 22 pages)
- James Baldwin, “The Discovery of What it Means to be An American.” (9 pages) \*Canvas
- James Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew.” (5 pages) \*Canvas

**6/21: The Essay and Black Feminism**

- June Jordan, “Introduction: Some of Us Did Not Die.” (13 pages) \*Canvas
- June Jordan, “The Invisible People: An Unsolicited Report on Black Rage.” (4 pages) \*Canvas
- June Jordan, “Break the Law!” (4 pages) \*Canvas
- June Jordan, “A Couple of Words on Behalf of Sex (Itself).” (4 pages) \*Canvas
- June Jordan, “Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan.” (17 pages) \*Canvas
- Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” (4 pages) \*Canvas
- Audre Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury.” (4 pages) \*Canvas
- Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism.” (10 pages) \*Canvas
- Audre Lorde, “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” (6 pages) \*Canvas

**ESSAY #2 DUE TO CANVAS BY FRIDAY, JUNE 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2017 by 5pm; Hard Copy Must Be Submitted in Class on 6/26**

**WEEK FIVE:**

**6/26: The Lyric Essay, Revisited**

- Claudia Rankine, *Citizen*
- Claudia Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*

**6/28**

- Hannah Black, “The Loves of Others” \*Canvas
- Hilton Als, “Tristes Tropiques,” from *White Girls*

**FINAL PAPER IS DUE (UPLOADED TO CANVAS) ON JUNE 30th, 2017 BY 5PM.  
LATE PAPERS WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED.**