

## English 300: Politics of Identity and the Essay Tradition

“The essay’s job is to track consciousness...” Philip Lopate

Required Texts:

Norman, Brian. *The American Protest Essay and National Belonging: Addressing Division*.

Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007. Print.

**(Texts on BB):**

### **Class Description**

This course will explore the essay as a rhetorical tool for social justice. This class is for advanced undergraduate writers and ethnic studies students who wish to study and practice the essay form as a means to speak back to the social conditions that affect peoples of marginalized identity. This class focuses on the complex border-spaces between privilege and marginalization in order to claim space for a more just and sustainable future. This class will use a process of inquiry to better understand the relationship between the essay and exigency.

Much has been written, studied, and debated about the “essay.” Both creative nonfiction writers and academic scholars alike claim the form. At the same time, because is so versatile, the essay is often taken up writers who defy categorization. Many of these writers are also members of marginalized identities. Their writing focuses on their relationship to the mainstream community, institutions, and governing bodies. They use their lived experience of racism, sexism, gender bigotry, and ableism to push back against the power dynamics that create the conditions in which social bias thrives. These dynamics are often the sources of exigency—the drive and force behind the writing. These essayists inquire, define, contest, and disrupt the world we live in. From this perspective, the essay acts a tool of resistance to the status quo. It is this “essay”—the essay that demands our attention, that calls us out, that claims space for the

marginalized identity—that we will explore and practice in this class. This means we will be learning two things:

- 1) How to read from a place of believing rather than a place of criticism in order to better empathize with voices that may challenge our worldviews
- 2) A process of writing that inquires into our relationships with ourselves and with others who are not like us and the power that helps define those roles. We will write about our relationship to our communities, institutions, and governing bodies. We attempt to locate exigency in our own relationships to power, our communities, our institutions, and our governing bodies.

Some of the questions we'll explore this semester are:

1. Who am I in context of community I was born to, the communities I choose to participate in, the institutions I claim, and the bodies that govern me.
2. What does mean to be privileged and/or marginalized and how do we write about it, why do we write about it.

We'll begin the course by orienting ourselves to the language and concepts that apply to the essay and the politics of identity, and then we will attempt to use these to analyze and describe the narrative methods of writers of the protest essay. This course hopes to accomplish the following:

- Provide students with practical strategies and useful concepts for revising their own work
- Distinguish some of the characteristics of the protest essay.
- Help students develop a language for talking about privilege, marginalization, power dynamics, and exigency; a knowledge that they can employ not only when thinking about their own work but when discussing power dynamics with others in workshop settings, in teaching, and public readings.

### **Teaching Philosophy**

This class is portfolio-based. This approach allows students an opportunity to present their best work for evaluation. This is more likely to happen when they can apply everything that they've learned at the end of the semester. Portfolios also are more likely to encourage genuine revision. This is also a discussion-based class. Students are responsible, with guidance from me, for leading discussion. By encouraging students to help generate content, it is far more likely that

the discussions will address the questions most students share about the material. This strategy also allows for the opportunity to create new knowledge—things come up in discussion that I can't always anticipate or know.

### **Course Work**

- 1. Writing responses.** You will produce six brief (500-600 words) reading responses to the readings of your choice. As a class we will develop possible questions for these responses in each class, because the act of questioning takes as much practice as learning strategies to answer questions. Responses must be turned in the week following the reading of the text.
- 2. Presentation:** Students in the course working in groups of three will lead discussion of the course readings, they will work to contextualize the lived experience, the historical context, and relevant information to the social problem the writer claims as their exigency. This means we will be discussing difficult topics like racism, sexism, gender bias, and ableism. This DOES not mean we will be discussing the validity of these social concerns—instead we'll begin by believing the writer has a legitimate concern and work from there. It is the presenter's jobs to help us better understand the exigency that drives the writing.
- 3. The Contextualized Self Essay:** This essay invites you to pick a relationship that is part of your complex identity and contextualize it. Think about how it affects you, how you in turn affect others, and how that connects to your day to day life. Consider the power dynamics involved. This can be any relationship to a community, institution, or governing body. For example you might look at your relationship with UNL.
- 4. The Bigger Picture:** This essay invites you to step back and look at the same relationship from different angles. Consider how a variety of identities have been affected by the power dynamics of their relationship with the same community, institution, or governing body. Locate a variety of writers who have complex identities and discuss their relationship with the community, institution, or governing body in question. For example you might look at a variety of students' relationships, community members relationship (consider the homeless' relationship to the university) in order to better understand the bigger picture.

### **Evaluation**

Half of your grade in the course will be based on your final portfolio. You will also be evaluated on the quality of your presentation and weekly reading responses.

Final portfolio: 50%

Presentation: 20%

Reading responses: 30%

## Fifteen Week Class Schedule

### Week One: The Essay Tradition

Syllabus discussion, Chimamanda Adichie “The Danger of a Single Story,” class creation of “reading with empathy rules” for difficult/different texts, question writing prompt, presentation handout/ schedule

### Week Two:

Lopate, Phillip. “Introduction” *The Art of the Personal Essay*  
Norman, Brian. “Introduction” *The American Protest Essay*  
Discussion, “the Contextualized Self” generative writing activity/handout, question writing prompt

### Week Three: The American Protest Tradition

Norman “Chapter One,”  
*Of a Monstrous Child*, Michel de Montaigne  
*Of the Training of Black Men*, W.E.B. Du Bois  
Presentation, discussion, question writing prompt

### Week Four:

(section of )*Democratic Vista*’s Walt Whitman  
*From the Archives -- December 2, 1504*, Vine Deloria Jr.  
*The Port Huron Statement for a Democratic Society, 1962*  
Presentation, discussion, question writing prompt, “The Bigger Picture” generative writing activity (essay 2)  
Due: Essay1 Draft1

### Week Five: The Feminist Tradition

Norman “Chapter Two,”  
*The Laugh of the Medusa*, Helene Cixous  
*A New Declaration of Independence*, by Emma Goldman  
Presentation, discussion, question writing prompt

### Week Six:

*Searching for Zora*, Alice Walker  
*When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*, Adrienne Rich  
*Bad Feminist*, by Roxanne Gay  
Presentation, discussion, question writing prompt

### Week Six:

Conferences  
Due: Essay 2 Draft 1  
Due: reading response self-check up

### Week Seven: Political Advocacy

Reading: Norman, “Chapter Four”  
Selections from James Baldwin & Vine Deloria Jr. Fredrick Douglass, Martin Luther King Jr.  
Presentation, discussion, question writing prompt

Week Eight:

Reading selections from Gloria Anzaldúa, Maya Angelou, Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston, Bharati Mukherjee,  
Presentation, discussion, question writing prompt

Week Nine: The Collective Futures

Reading: Norman, "Chapter Five"  
*The Long Now* Michael Chabon  
*The American Geographies,* Barry Lopez  
*The God of the Desert,* Richard Rodriguez  
Presentation, discussion, question writing prompt  
Due Essay 1 Draft 2

Week Ten:

Reading: *Deify the Wolf*, Linda Hogan  
*The Killing Game*, Joy Williams  
*Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer  
In-class: presentations, discussion, question writing prompt,

Week Eleven: Transnational American Protest

Reading: Norman, "Chapter Six," & Conclusion  
In-class: discussion, peer review handout, question writing prompt,

Week Twelve:

Reading: *Don't you talk about my mama*, June Jordan  
*Toward a Manifest of New Destiny*, June Jordan  
In-class discussion, question writing prompt  
Due Peer review drafts

Week Thirteen:

Conferences  
Due: reading response self-check up (all prompts due by this date)  
Due: draft of "Exploration of the Teacher Self"

Week Fourteen:

In-class: Essay 1 peer review

Week Fifteen Guiding Questions:

Essay 2 Peer review  
Due (end of finals week): Final portfolio