

Writing About “The Other”

Fall 2021

JOUR-GA 1023.002

Tuesday, 5-8 p.m.

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Much of today’s writing in journalism and fiction assumes that being an “insider”--however defined--is a virtue and will lead to that mysterious quality called “authenticity.” There is some truth in this--those within a group (whether racial, national, gender, etc.) can sometimes access truths that others cannot. But “outsiders” can also be perceptive, and see things that the in-group can’t (de Tocqueville’s observations on America, written in the 19th century, remain invaluable). And in fact, much if not most of the best journalistic writing has been done by “outsiders.”

The emphasis on insiders and outsiders can result in an obsession with identity--and a reductive definition of it. In fact, we all have multiple identities, based on, but not limited to, race, class, profession, gender, sexuality, nationality, religion, and region. In assuming that one identity defines, or validates, a writer--and that another somehow disqualifies her--we risk obscuring the full range and complexity of our own, and others’, lived realities. We also risk forgetting the fact that a main function of journalism (and of art) is to take both reader and writer *outside* of ourselves--to expand our own understandings and those of our readers. To paraphrase George Orwell, journalism should be a window pane, not a mirror.

This course will focus on works that were written from an “outside” perspective (broadly defined). We will read a wide variety of works and study the ways in which writers have entered into the lives of others and tried to comprehend them. We’ll study successes and even, perhaps, (partial) failures. We will look, of course, at the crucial value of empathy in reporting, but also at less palatable and more problematic emotions/problems. How, for instance, does a writer approach a person, or group of people, whose political views or cultural values repel her? What does a journalist do if she witnesses criminal behavior, or if she knows that her subject is lying? How does a journalist deal with emotions such as disappointment and anger? And how does one engage disparities in power--whether from above or below?

We will also read several essays written in the first person that show how the best writers engage large cultural/political questions even when presumably writing about themselves.

This course is designed for students who love to read, who love to think, and who are interested in encountering complex, challenging ideas outside of "traditional boxes."

Writing Assignments:

Response Papers:

For each book, you will submit a response paper of approximately 750 words. The paper should synthesize your intellectual/emotional responses to the reading, and compare it to others. Please avoid the use of the first-person pronoun as much as possible.

Each week, you will bring in three questions, a sentence selection, and a surprise as they relate to the readings. I will explain this more in our first class.

Final Paper: For your final paper, you may write:

1. A reported piece, in which you will find a person or group within the city who is in some fundamental way different from (and maybe confusing to) you. You will research, report, and write a profile or investigative article on the person/group. If you choose this option, we will need to discuss if there is a safe (socially-distanced) way for you to do it.
2. A critical essay, in which you will critically assess at least two of the books on our syllabus (whether on the basis of theme, political perspective, language, reportorial style, moral engagement, etc.), along with at least one other book that is not on our syllabus but that can be thoughtfully analyzed in light of the other two.

OUR SCHEDULE:

Week 1: Introduction

Who am I? Who are we? Who is the Other?

Week 2: Beyond Reductive Identities

Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity*

Week 3: Contemporary Debates [articles to be distributed]

Hilton Als on Bruce Springsteen, *The New Yorker*

Coco Fusco, "Censorship, Not the Painting, Must Go," *Hyperallergic*

Wesley Morris, "The Morality Wars," *New York Times*

Zadie Smith, "Fascinated to Presume" and "What Do We Want History to Do to Us?," *New York Review of Books*

Weeks 4&5: American Tribes in the Age of Trump

Larissa MacFarquhar, "In the Heart of Trump Country," *The New Yorker* [to be distributed]

"A Voice of Hate in America's Heartland," *NYTimes* [distributed]

Arlie Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*

Weeks 6&7: Immersion

Teju Cole on Caravaggio, *NYTimes Magazine* [distributed]

Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, *Random Family*

Interview with LeBlanc, *New Yorker*, 2013 [distributed]

Weeks 8&9: Anthropology

Reginald Betts: "Kamala Harris, Mass Incarceration, and Me," *NYT Magazine* [distributed]

Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*

Week 10: Foreign Affairs: Confusion

Joan Didion, *Salvador*

Week 11: Foreign Affairs: Observation [articles to be distributed]

Peter Hessler, "Learning to Speak Lingerie" and "Tales of the Trash," *The New Yorker*

Wendell Steavenson, "Two Revolutions," *The New Yorker*

Weeks 12&13: Foreign Affairs: Empathy

Wesley Morris, "My Mustache, Myself," *NYTimes Magazine* [distributed]

Katherine Boo: *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*

Week 14: Confronting Power

Oriana Fallaci, *Interview with History* [excerpts]:

Preface, Yasser Arafat, Ayatollah Khomeini, Henry Kissinger

plus: Jonathan Tepperman, "A Conversation with Bashar al-Assad," *Foreign Affairs*,

March/April 2015 [to be distributed]

and: Concluding Thoughts//

Final Papers Due

[Please note: Other readings may be added on selected weeks.]

Books to buy, all in paperback, via internet (or independent bookstores!). Suggested sites: bibliofind.com, abebooks.com. Please order early!

Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity*

Arlie Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*

Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, *Random Family*

Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*

Joan Didion, *Salvador*

Katherine Boo: *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*

Oriana Fallaci, *Interview with History* [out of print; order used]

A seminar is a collective endeavor to which all should contribute. (That means you!)

Missed classes: Please do not miss any classes except for cases of illness or family emergency. Please email me on the day of class if you will be forced to be absent. Missed classes, other than for excused absences, will affect your grade (and, more important, your ability to get the most from the readings).

Plagiarism is bad. Please don't even consider it. **Any** plagiarism will result in a failing grade for the entire course.