

## Seminar Descriptions for Spring 2014

### **Hannah Ashley: Community Literacy and Community-Engaged Writing: Theory, History, Practice**

This course will study “literacy work [writ large] that exists outside of mainstream educational and work institutions” (*Community Literacy Journal*, mission). We have a long national history and a powerful current movement of meaning-making through textual and symbolic production outside mainstream educational and other “approved” institutions. This course will study such movements through primary (community-based) research, as well as theory. That is, we will learn in part through studying local and regional community-based literacy programs and projects in hands-on way, and applying what we have learned in class to theorize that work. Having a working praxis concerning community literacy is both a critical and practical pre-professional perspective for English BA and BSED students planning to enter public work in government or non-profits, youth work both in and outside of schools, media and PR, and other.

### **Jen Bacon and Christopher Merkner: Writing the Feminist Body: Gender, Sexuality, and Narrative in Post-Identity America (Two ENG400 sections)**

This team-taught seminar will explore theories of narrativity as they relate to the performance of gender and sexuality in the texts of contemporary writers in the U.S., drawing on Dr. Bacon’s expertise in contemporary Feminist Theory and Rhetoric, and on Dr. Merkner’s expertise in Narrative Theory and Fiction. What does it mean to write an individual narrative, knowing that our stories of self are always already situated within a context of master narratives that hail us into being? Narrative, Judith Roof suggests, “is omnipresent... permeating and ordering any representation we make to ourselves or to others” (xv). But the narrative, she goes on, requires a conflict in order for the ending to be satisfying. “Without the possibility that something might go wrong, the saving force...means nothing” (xix). The aberrations are part of the story... they have the potential to cut the story short...but we only know the story is cut short because we know how it is supposed to end (xxi). What potential exists for writing a feminist narrative, or a feminist body, into such a space? This course will examine the ways in which writers configure sexuality, gender, politics, the body, authority, and postmodern subjectivity, paying special attention to the potential for subversive narratives to arrive at fresh articulations of identity, community, and desire.

### **Kristine Ervin: Truth & Authenticity in Contemporary Creative Nonfiction**

This course will explore the slippery nature of the creative nonfiction genre, with its blurred and blurring boundaries; with its swirling questions surrounding essential truth versus factual truth, memory, subjectivity, and allegiance to aesthetics; and with its often implied contract with its readers. Students will engage with contemporary creative nonfiction texts, including memoir and the personal essay and with current scholarship regarding the central questions of the genre. Additionally, students will investigate the ways in which the postmodern perspective, with its attention to multiplicity and fragmentation, informs the genre’s definitions and complexities. Along with exploring the subject of truth and authenticity through a formal research project, students will also practice in art of writing creative nonfiction, thereby pushing the line of inquiry through multiple lenses to answer or to complicate the questions “What does truth in nonfiction mean and does it even matter?”

**Erin Hurt: Reading Race, Ethnicity, and Nation in the Graphic Novel**

Through close readings of graphic novels, this seminar asks students to only develop a new approach to literacy. As they do so, students will examine how graphic novels draw on the genre's formal qualities in order to enable new ethnic and cultural representations. The course will begin by examining the history and development of the graphic novel: where did it come from? How has it evolved? Next, we will consider a number of novels, with a focus on how the work's representation of cultural identity intersects with, and draws on, its stylistic strategies. The course will end with students' final projects, in which they will synthesize their knowledge of this material and present their own conclusions about the graphic novel and this medium's ability to represent the US experience for the marginalized other. During the semester, students will practice a number of different skills such as close reading, content and audience reception analysis, finding relevant scholarly work, and synthesizing critical arguments.

**Seth Kahn: Activism and Activist Rhetoric**

This course investigates the rhetorics that activists use in their work as educators, organizers, and mobilizers. We will approach activist rhetoric from three directions. First, we will consider an array of theories of persuasion and deliberation, theorizing rhetoric as the basis upon which democracy depends. Second, we will take a case-study approach to several activist campaigns, some of which students will select as part of their research for the course (e.g., environmental, human rights, reproductive rights, election campaigns). Finally, we will study the first-person accounts of activist rhetoricians, who describe their own activist work, and how they understand rhetoric's place in it. Research projects may result in either critical/rhetorical analyses of a specific activist campaign, a conceptual articulation of activism or activist rhetoric based on the semester's work, or portfolios that students use in their own activist work.

**Paul Maltby: Postmodern Film**

This course will explore the instructor's thesis that postmodern film, in its most characteristic mode, is most productively read as an ironic and critical response to the film and television genres prevalent in a late-capitalist media culture. We shall examine such formal and structural features as self-reflexiveness, genre-splicing, and parodic intertextuality, which constitute the art of postmodern film. We shall consider the themes, premises, and formal experiments of some postmodern films as symptoms of a culture defined by consumerism and a weakened sense of historical consciousness. We shall also consider how the themes and formal properties of other postmodern films may be read as a source of critique and resistance to the cultural degradations of late capitalism and to sexist, racist, and homophobic attitudes. We shall look at how the public response to postmodern films has been orchestrated by film journalism, by marketing through the Web, and by TV entertainment channels which promote the celebrity status of postmodern film-makers (like Quentin Tarantino, David Lynch, Tim Burton, and Oliver Stone). And we shall examine the extent to which these films are informed by post-structuralist concepts of textuality and subjectivity, and consider how postmodern film theory problematizes the modernist concepts of auteurism and avantgardism. The principal critical perspectives will be informed by cultural criticism and postmodern theory. The rationale for the course is that given how postmodern aesthetics, epistemology, and politics have, since the 1970s, defined a significant proportion of film production in the US (ranging from mainstream feature films to independent movies and music video), postmodern film merits critical attention and socio-historical analysis.

### **Christopher Merkner and Jen Bacon: Writing the Feminist Body: Gender, Sexuality, and Narrative in Post-Identity America (Two ENG400 sections)**

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### **Joe Navitsky: Shakespeare's America / America's Shakespeare**

This research seminar examines the inheritance of William Shakespeare in nineteenth- and twentieth-century America. Much like his impact on English language and literature, Shakespeare—poet, celebrity, and literary icon—remains a crucial force in the cultural imagination of America. But what accounts for the abiding relevance of the plays of an *Englishman* and how do they continue to shape *American* cultural experience today? More specifically, how are attitudes toward Shakespeare deeply bound up in American democratic ideals of freedom of expression, racial and religious equality, and access to education? Special emphasis will be given to the collaborative nature of theatrical and film production and to those critical issues (literary adaptation, the "cult of genius," the formation of the canon, and secondary and university curricula) relevant to the work of all English majors, especially those with an interest in teaching. Familiarity with Shakespeare is not a requirement but enthusiasm for his work is since we will be reading 5-6 plays and a series of appropriations of those plays. To this end, we will pursue a rigorous schedule with supplementary readings on the cultural and intellectual history of America and on theories of artistic imitation and adaptation.

### **Will Nessly: U.S. Literature From the Margins**

This seminar is targeted toward students interested in theorizing diversity in twentieth-century U.S. literature, with an emphasis on addressing a wide range of genres, time periods in the century, and identity categories, including race, gender, sexuality and disability. We will use well-known novels, poetry, film, drama and nonfictional works to explore recent critical movements in the field of American studies, the political and cultural boundaries of the nation, imperialism, regional differences, exile and migration, the frontier, and the ideological significance of distinct literary forms. You will examine literature by David Henry Hwang, Henry James, Sandra Cisneros, and Walt Whitman the class Western film *The Searchers*, and selections from theoretical works by Eve Sedgwick, Amy Kaplan, Jose David Saldivar, and W. E. B. DuBois, among others. This seminar's exploration of the conceptual and geopolitical margins of the U.S. will be especially useful for aspiring scholars and teachers of U.S. literature.

**Elizabeth Nollen: Serial Killers in Film, Fiction, and Popular Culture**

In this writing-emphasis seminar, we will explore America's obsession with serial killers, both real and fictional, and how this obsession reflects our cultural values. Who are these monsters? Why have they become the leading bogeymen of our times? Why do they kill the way they do? Why are we drawn to them? In what ways do they reflect our postmodern fears? And finally, who is taking a leadership role in attempting to understand and stop them? Since this is a writing-emphasis course, you will work on improving your ability to communicate effectively (Goal 1 of the General Education Curriculum) throughout the semester. Readings will be drawn from literary and film criticism, gender studies, cultural studies, folklore, psychology, sociology, forensic science, and criminology. Our primary text will be Philip L. Simpson's *Psycho Paths: Tracking the Serial Killer Through Contemporary American Film and Fiction*, a comprehensive, highly readable study of the topic focusing on the 1980s to the present. Simpson's work will lay the critical groundwork for our class discussions and presentations.

**Judy Scheffler: Whose American Dream? : Images of Business in American Literature**

In this seminar students will explore ways in which American writers from the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries have presented business in literature. Our readings will begin with works of fiction depicting business in nineteenth-century America, and we will move on in the second half of the course to consider how twentieth and twenty-first century fiction and drama depict issues involving business in society. As we read, we will use a cultural criticism perspective to consider how writers have used images of business to critique the American Dream. To many authors, the reality of business is brutally opposed to the myth that all may enjoy success. "Survival of the fittest" more accurately describes the principle at work in the business environment as depicted in many literary works. Seminar participants will discuss how gender, race and class considerations affect the presentation of business in literature and how assigned works question the relevance of the dream for all Americans.

**Eleanor Shevlin: Literary Awards and Contemporary Publishing**

While our era has witnessed a diminishing number of publishers and independent bookstores, it has also seen an exponential rise in literary awards. This course focuses on select contenders and winners of several well-known literary awards based in the UK from the late 1990s through 2011. It examines the influences these awards have on 1) publishing practices, 2) the place of "serious" literary works in the everyday marketplace, 3) canon formation, and 4) the ways these works have contributed to shifts in definitions and conceptions national identity against the backdrop of globalization.

Over the years these prizes have become a magnet for controversy, gossip, scandal and speculation; the Booker Prize especially has become a well-orchestrated media event; a key player in the commercialization of English-language literature; a lightning rod in postcolonial/ neocolonialist debates over the status of global literary production; and even an item to wager on in U.K. betting shops.

**Cheryl Wanko: The Literature & Language of Environmentalism**

This seminar takes a mainly historical approach to how nature has been constructed in North American writing. It begins with the English and American Romantic traditions, as well as some First Nations texts (taken from oral tradition). It then looks at important non-fiction works such as Muir and Carson. The course then questions the gendering, heteronorming, and racializing of relations to nature in the fictional works of Abbey, Gearhart, and Kingsolver, with particular attention paid to the discourse shift resulting from the environmental justice movement. The course concludes with some newer non-fiction, in order to point to current trends in cultural studies, ecocriticism, nature writing, and sustainability memoir. Students in this seminar will do a variety of writing, from personal writing such as reflecting on their own relationships with the natural world, to structured research writing, such as building a bibliography and writing a formal research paper. They will also participate in No Impact Week (<http://noimpactproject.org>) and write about that experience.