Twentieth Century American Women Writers: Women Write War (Spring 2017)

“Our bodies, too, are always incessantly changing, / and what we were, or are, is not what we will be, / tomorrow: once we were seeds, the hope of our fathers, / and lay concealed in the womb of our first mothers; / creative Nature willed otherwise: took us in hand, and / out of the narrow confines of mother's expanded / viscera, sent us forth into the open air, homeless!” Ovid, "Prophetic Acts" in Metamorphoses (Charles Martin, trans)

“... /When death comes / like an iceberg between the shoulder blades, / I want to step through the door full of curiosity, / wondering: / what is it going to be like, that cottage full of darkness? / And, therefore, I look upon everything / as a brotherhood and a sisterhood, / and I look upon time as no more than an idea, / and I consider eternity as another possibility / and I think of each life as a flower, as common /as a field daisy, and as singular / ... “ Mary Oliver, “When Death Comes”

Wonder is defined as a constriction and suspension of the heart caused by amazement at the appearance of something so portentous, and unusual that the heart suffers a systole. Hence wonder is something like fear in its effect on the heart. This effect of wonder, then, this constriction and systole of the heart, springs from an unfulfilled but felt desire to know... Now the man who is puzzled and wonders apparently does not know. ... Hence wonder is the movement of the man who does not know on his way to finding out.” Albertus Magnus, Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle qtd in Greenblatt, Marvelous Possessions

“I have various impulses. I’ve often quoted Walt Whitman’s phrase 'I contain multitudes.' I understand that.... Why do people want to know exactly who I am? Am I a poet? Am I this or that? I’ve always made people wary. First they called me a rock poet. Then I was a poet that dabbled in rock. Then I was a rock person who dabbled in art. But for me, working in different forms seemed like a very organic process. From an early age, I studied people like Da Vinci and William Blake and Jean Cocteau. They all did a lot of different things. But if you want to call me anything, call me a worker. I do work. … I never thought about gender. I never felt oppressed because of my gender. When I’m writing a poem or drawing, I’m not a female; I’m an artist. ... I’m more concerned with the work people do than their gender. ...I just want to see the work. It doesn’t matter who does it.” (Patti Smith, "The Slate Interview," 2008)

Overview:

The course focus, a standard on university campuses across the nation, implies women’s distinct voices and women’s distinct concerns in twentieth-century America’s distinct society: or, implies that the distinctions of nation, gender, and historic moment can be identified in and are significant to literary content and form. In this course, we will test this implication against the voices of select 20th American women writers (Toni Morrison, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Edith Summers Kelley, Louise Erdrich, Marilynnne Robinson, Elizabeth Bishop, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich). We’ll also break the rules a bit and add the 19th century’s Emily Dickinson and the 21st century’s Maggie Nelson; it’s easier to see something when you place it against something. We will ground our discussion in critical theory related to écriture féminine and we will organize our discussion around the characteristics of gendered trauma; how did 20th-century American women writers write war?

Texts:

- Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, eds., Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism: A Norton Reader (Optional)
- Edith Wharton, Summer
- Willa Cather, My Ántonia
- Edith Summers Kelley, Weeds
- Maggie Nelson, The Argonauts
• Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*
• Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine*

**Requirements**

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<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
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<td>Short Essays (4, at 15% each)</td>
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<td>Final exam (cumulative)</td>
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Each of your four 3-5 page essays must be turned in at the beginning of class on the day it is due, typed and double-spaced, with 1” margins. I encourage you to incorporate texts and ideas from your other courses in these essays and I am happy to work with your other professors to develop length and content criteria for a joint/dual-class essay; we’ll talk about this more week 1. All of your essays may be revised, for up to a grade-point increase on each revision (C → B, for example). One of your essays must be revised (see essay 4, below). **Finally, one of your essays must incorporate personal experience OR - if you are not an English major - the language of art of your major.**

Your participation grade is based on your careful and diligent reading of the assigned texts and on your willingness to talk about this reading in class; there will be lecture segments, but this will largely be a discussion-based environment. Although I will not keep strict attendance, there are few of us in the room, your absence will be noted/you will be missed, and multiple absences will negatively impact your grade.

The final take-home exam will be composed of three sections: definitions; short answer; long answer. I will provide more details later in the semester.

**Academic Honesty**

All work that you submit for this class must be your own, and it must be written exclusively for this course. The unacknowledged borrowing of others’ words or ideas—whether from books, the internet, or other sources—constitutes the serious academic crime of plagiarism if you fail to document properly those sources consulted for your writing, you risk an automatic failure for the entire course. If you have any doubts or questions about plagiarism or the University’s policy on it, please see me.

**Special Needs**

If you have a documented disability, or otherwise anticipate needing special accommodations for this course, please bring this to my attention as early in the semester as possible so that we have an understanding and can make arrangements.
Tentative Schedule

Please note: this schedule is truly tentative and will be adjusted according to the needs of the class. Specific reading assignments will be determined at least one week in advance. All reading must be completed by class time on the date listed. Please note that you are not prepared for class unless you have that reading in front of you as we discuss it.

Unit 1: Women and Voice

“Human experience,’ as referred to in our diagnostic manuals, and as the subject for much of the important writing on trauma, often means ‘male human experience’ or, at the least, an experience common to both women and men. The range of human experience becomes the range of what is normal and usual in the lives of men of the dominant class: white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men. Trauma is thus that which disrupts these particular human lives, but no other. War and genocide, which are the work of men and male-dominated culture, are agree-upon traumas; so are natural disasters, vehicle crashes, boats sinking in the freezing ocean. Public events, visible to all, rarely themselves harbinger of stigma for their victims, things that can and do happen to men--all of these constitute trauma in the official lexicon.” Laura S. Brown (my emphasis)

Wk 1 (Jan. 23)

NB: these essays (Heidegger, Jakobson, Kristeva) are long, fraught, slippery, and could take much more time than you have or I expect. Do your best/consult summaries as needed. We’re building a shared vocabulary for subsequent discussions--meaning that we will revisit these essays all semester.

- **m** Course introduction
  - reading for Wednesday: Heidegger, “Language” (on Moodle); Jakobson, “Two Aspects…”
- **w** Voice I
  - reading for Friday: Kristeva, “Semiotics and Symbolic” and “Women’s Time” (both on Moodle)
- **f** Voice II
  - reading for Monday: Susan Sontag, “Looking at War” (on Moodle); Begin Summer

Wk 2 (Jan. 30)

- **m** Trauma I
  - Reading for Wednesday: continue Summer
- **w** Discussion: Summer
  - reading for Friday: Summer
- **f** Discussion: Summer
  - Reading for Monday: finish Summer; Toni Morrison, “Strangers” [2 pages]; “Charles D’Ambrosio “Instead of Sobbing…” (also short; both on Moodle)

Unit 2: Women and the Nation

“All Nation-States are born and found themselves in violence. I believe that truth to be irrecusable. Without even exhibiting atrocious spectacles on this subject, if suffices to underline a law of structure: the moment of foundation, the
instituting moment, is anterior to the law or legitimacy which it founds. It is thus outside the law, and violent by that very fact.” Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*

**Wk 3 (Feb. 6)**

- m Writers Workshop; *Summer* discussion and prompt development
  Reading for Wednesday: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (excerpt; on Moodle)
- w **Essay 1 Due (3-4 pages)**; The Nation (lecture)
  Reading for Friday: Anne McClintock, “No Longer in a Future Heaven” (on Moodle)
- f Women and the Nation
  Reading for Monday: Gloria Anzaldúa, pp. 247-258, Norton Reader; also on Moodle [please note: we’ll revisit this important essay when we get to *Love Medicine*.]

  **Unit 2: Women and the Nation, continued**

**Wk 4 (Feb. 13)**

- m Women and the Nation II
  reading for Wednesday: begin *My Ántonia*
- w Discussion: *My Ántonia*
  reading for Friday: *My Ántonia*
- f *My Ántonia*
  reading for Wednesday: Finish *My Ántonia*

**Unit 3: Women and Trauma**

**Wk 5 (Feb 20)**

- m **No Class; Presidents’ Day Holiday**
- w *My Ántonia* discussion and prompt development
  Reading for Friday: Virginia Woolf, “A Room of One’s Own,” pp. 128-136, Norton Reader (also on Moodle); Gilbert & Gubar, “The Madwoman in the Attic”: pp. 448-459, Norton Reader (also on Moodle)
- f Essay 2 Due (3-4 pages); Women’s Concerns I
  reading for Monday: Kolodny, “Dancing through the Minefield”: pp. 473-491, Norton Reader (also on Moodle)

**Wk 6 (Feb 27)**

- m Women’s Concerns II
  Reading for Wednesday: begin *Weeds*
- w *Weeds* Discussion
- f *Weeds* Discussion
  Reading for Monday: finish *Weeds*
Wk 7 (March 6)

- m  Weeds Discussion
  Reading for Wednesday: Stuart Hall (on Moodle)
- w  Trauma II
  Reading for Friday: Begin The Argonauts
- f  The Argonauts Discussion
  Reading for Monday: The Argonauts

Wk 8 (March 13)

“That is what deconstruction is made of: not the mixture but the tension between memory, fidelity, the preservation of something that has been given to us, and, at the same time, heterogeneity, something absolutely new, and a break.” Jacques Derrida

- m  The Argonauts Discussion
  Reading for Wednesday: Finish The Argonauts
- w  The Argonauts Discussion
  Reading for Friday: Begin Housekeeping
- f  Housekeeping Discussion
  Reading for Week 10: finish Housekeeping

Wk 9 (March 20)

**NO CLASS: Spring Break**

Unit 3: Women and Trauma, continued

Wk 10 (March 27)

- m  Housekeeping Discussion
- w  Weeds, The Argonauts, Housekeeping prompt development
- f  Writing Workshop
  Reading for Monday: None. Essay 3 due Monday

Unit 4: Gender, Race, and Trauma; or, Women & Voice Revisited

Wk 11 (April 3)

- m  Essay 3 Due (5-6 pages) Race I
  Reading for Wednesday: revisit “Borderlands,” pp. 247-258 Norton Reader and Moodle, Week 3;
  Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity,” pp. 824-834, Norton Reader (also on Moodle)
- w  Race II
Reading for Friday: Erdrich interview in *Paris Review* (on Moodle). Begin *Love Medicine* (please use the course edition, so that we’re reading and discussing the same story; Erdrich revised LM with each new release)

- **f** *Love Medicine* Discussion
  Reading for Monday: *Love Medicine*

**Wk 12 (April 10)**

- **m** *Love Medicine* Discussion
- **w** *Love Medicine* Discussion: Guest speaker (I hope)
- **f** *Love Medicine* Discussion

**Unit 5: World Literature (or, Women and the Nation revisited)**

**Wk 13 (April 17)**

- **m** World Literature
  reading for Wednesday: Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Bishop; poems to be determined
- **w** Dickinson and Bishop discussion
- **f** Lorde and Rich discussion

**Wk 14 (April 24)**

- **m** Catch-up/make-up day
- **t** individual writing conferences.
- **w** individual writing conferences. No class
- **r** individual writing conferences.
- **f** individual writing conferences. No class

**Wk 15 (May 1)**

Note: essay 4 and all revisions due Wednesday May 3; Essay 4 will be a revision of Essay 1, 2, OR 3 - with the addition of our Unit 4 and Unit 5 authors

- **m** Writing Workshop
- **w** **Essay 4 (5-6 pages) and all revisions due;** Course Summary
- **f** Exam Review
Final Exam:

The take-home exam will be posted to Moodle at 5:00 pm Friday May 5 and will be due in the Moodle drop box by noon on Wednesday May 10th.