

GESM 120g: Poetry and Protest

Mon/Wed 2–3:20pm
Fall 2020

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Office Hours: Zoom, Mon 12–1, and by appt

Course Description

Plato banished poets from his ideal republic as threats to political stability; Percy Shelley argued that poets, as language-makers, are more powerful than kings; while Theodor Adorno thought that horrific political crimes made poetry impossible, claiming that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” In this class we explore the close, and often contentious, relationship between poetry and politics by reading texts composed amidst revolution, war, and other social unrest. Among the questions we ask: how have poets historically imagined their relation to political life? How are political emotions such as frustration, rage, or hope central to poetry? How does poetry, as a technology of voice, recreate the unities and diversities of political identity?

We focus these questions through the concept of *protest*, understood not just as dissent but also in its wider senses as an act of witnessing or a formal declaration. Considering poetry broadly as highly imaginative, symbolic, and patterned language, we follow how poetry and protest interact not only in history but also today, whether in Kendrick Lamar’s *good kid, m.A.A.d. city*, Beyoncé’s visual album *Lemonade*, or Claudia Rankine’s tour-de-force poem *Citizen: An American Lyric*.

Learning Objectives

At the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Read actively and collaboratively by noting moments of clarity or confusion, recording your reactions, and writing comments and questions in conversation with one another.
- Analyze texts in terms of imagery, tone, and voice, and using the rhetorical concepts of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*.
- Use theoretical frameworks to evaluate poems’ political import.
- Creatively experiment with different poetic forms and styles to think about their effects on meaning.
- Reflect on the relationship between identity and political expression in your life.

Course Texts

Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself* (Counterpoint, 2011) (Please get this exact edition)
Eliza Griswold and Seamus Murphy, *I Am the Beggar of the World: Landays from Contemporary Afghanistan* (2014)
Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014)
Mia Yumi Malhotra, *Isako Isako* (2018)

Course Platforms

Blackboard: Links to readings will be posted here, as well as announcements and grades. Assignments and exercises will be turned in here (unless otherwise noted).

Google Drive: Each class will have an assigned Google doc with poems to annotate beforehand, and with a record of in-class discussion and work. Use your USC email address to sign in (or request access, if necessary).

Slack: We will use a class Slack channel to post about poems not discussed in meetings. Use your USC email address to sign in (or request access, if necessary).

Zoom: Ah, Zoom. We will use Zoom for class meetings. Please have your video on, if at all possible, and your audio muted unless you are talking. Contact me if you will have to miss class meetings and I will provide you with a recording and an alternate assignment.

Description of Assignments and Grading Breakdown

This seminar is designed around weekly intensive work rather than building to cumulative, high-stakes assignments. As such, it depends on your curiosity, your willingness to take intellectual risks, and your lively engagement with the readings, with one another, with me, and with yourself.

Most class meetings will require pre-work (primarily annotating course readings, and occasionally responding to framing questions) and post-work (such as writing a paragraph digesting a topic discussed in class). This will count towards your **classwork** grade, along with other forms of participation including responding to classmates' writing, speaking/typing in the Zoom chat, and adding to the class Google doc.

In addition to classwork, you will participate in the **class Slack channel**, adding five posts that each discuss a poem not covered in class, and commenting regularly on other students' posts.

You will sign up to serve as a **scribe** for one class in the semester, where you will post major topics, questions, and points made in class discussion to the class Google doc.

You will complete **eight short assigned exercises**, ranging from analyses to opinion pieces to creative experiments.

You will write a **reflective essay** of 500–750 words in which you consider how your various identities shape your capacity for political expression.

You will take a **final take-home exam** in which you evaluate political theories of poetry and use them to read poems; compare poems in terms of imagery, tone, or voice; and write a short essay on the rhetoric of identity.

Assignment	Points
Scribe	25
Slack Posts	100
Reflective Essay	125
Classwork	150
Final Exam	200

Final Grade: A 930–1000; A- 895–929; B+ 870–894; B 830–869; B- 795–829; C+ 770–794; C 730–769

Expectations

You will:

- **participate in each class.** Participation in a remote semester will be more flexible and more creative than in person. It may include: annotating/ commenting on course readings; writing responses to classmates' comments; speaking in class; listening actively; typing in Zoom chat; and contributing to the class Google doc. If at all possible, please keep your video on while in Zoom meetings so that we can feel more like humans and less like robots.
- **closely read assigned texts**, making notes while you read, and come to class prepared for discussion.
- **work to produce creative and intelligent writing.**
- **turn your work in on time.** Exercises and essays turned in after the due date will be penalized by ten points for each day that they are late. Contact me ahead of time if you will need an extension.

I will:

- **prepare for class time** while remaining flexible to respond to your interests, questions, and concerns.
- **approach each day with enthusiasm** and an openness to learning alongside you.
- **communicate clearly and in a timely manner** about assignments, deadlines, and grading criteria.
- **be available** over email and by appointment over video to discuss issues relating to the course, and to serve as a resource for your reading, thinking, and writing.
- **read your work carefully, provide thoughtful feedback, and evaluate it fairly** according to clear standards.

Course Readings

A note on poetry: most poems are short. But short does not mean easy! I expect you to read each short assigned text three times—once for basic comprehension, once to note words, images, or lines that jump out at you, and once to write comments or questions that can feed into class discussion.

Schedule of Readings			
	Topics	Readings	Tasks
Week 1 Aug 17	Introduction	Charles Bernstein, "A Poem Is Not a Weapon" W. H. Auden, "Epitaph on a Tyrant" Louise Glück, frontispiece to <i>Vita Nova</i> Tommye Blount, "Pedestrian"	
Aug 19	Theories	Plato, from <i>The Republic</i> Stephen Crane, "[Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind]"	

		Rupert Brooke, "The Soldier" Wilfred Owen, "Dulce et Decorum Est" Randall Jarrell, "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner"	
Week 2 Aug 24		Friedrich Nietzsche, from <i>The Birth of Tragedy</i> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Kubla Khan" Dylan Thomas, "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" Alan Ginsberg, "Howl" Kendrick Lamar, "Alright"	
Aug 26		Percy Bysshe Shelley, from <i>A Defence of Poetry</i> Shelley, "Ode to the West Wind" Walt Whitman, "Songs of Insurrection" Jean Toomer, "Portrait in Georgia" Gil Scott-Heron, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised"	Turn in Exercise 1
Week 3 Aug 31		Oscar Wilde, from "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" Lucille Clifton, "homage to my hips" Missy Elliott, "WTF (Where They From)" MILCK, "Quiet" Janelle Monae, "Pynk"	
Sept 2		Adrienne Rich, from "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision" Rich, "Diving into the Wreck" Sylvia Plath, "The Colossus" Anne Sexton, "In Celebration of my Uterus" Joan Larkin, "'Vagina' Sonnet"	Turn in Exercise 2
Week 4			
Sept 7		LABOR DAY – NO CLASS	
Sept 9		Frantz Fanon, from "National Culture" Claude McKay, "Outcast" Langston Hughes, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" Audre Lorde, "From the House of Yemanjá"	Turn in Exercise 3
Week 5			
Sept 14		Audre Lorde, "Poetry is not a Luxury" Margaret Walker, "For My People" Lorde, "Power" Carolyn Forché, "The Colonel" Alice Walker, "Turning Madness into Flowers #1"	
Sept 16	Histories War on Terror	Eliza Griswold and Seamus Murphy, <i>I am the Beggar of the World</i>	Turn in Exercise 4
Week 6 Sept 21		<i>I am the Beggar of the World</i> , cont'd.	
Sept 23		Fred D'Aguiar, "War on Terror" Solmaz Sharif, "LOOK" Paul Muldoon, "Afghanistan"	Turn in Exercise 5

		Adam Zagajewski, "Try to Praise the Mutilated World"	
Week 7 Sept 28	Black Lives Matter	Langston Hughes, fr. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes, "America," "Harlem" Claude McKay, "America" Georgia Douglas Johnson, "The Heart of a Woman" Countee Cullen, "Incident"	
Sept 30		Martin Luther King, Jr., fr. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" Stokely Carmichael, fr. "What we want" Etheridge Knight, "The Idea of Ancestry" Nina Simone, "Mississippi Goddamn" Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till"	
Week 8 Oct 5		Cornel West, from "Race Matters" Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise" Public Enemy, "Fight the Power" 2Pac, "Changes" Harryette Mullen, "We Are Not Responsible"	Turn in Exercise 6
Oct 7		Claudia Rankine, <i>Citizen</i> , Parts 1–5	
Week 9 Oct 12		<i>Citizen</i> , Parts 6–7	Turn in Exercise 7
Oct 14		Jericho Brown, "Tradition" Terrence Hayes, "American Sonnet for my Past and Future Assassin" Jonathan Bachman, "Taking a Stand in Baton Rouge" Tracy K. Smith, "Unrest in Baton Rouge" Danez Smith, "Tonight, in Oakland"	
Week 10 Oct 19	Identities	Walt Whitman, from <i>Song of Myself</i>	
Oct 21		from <i>Song of Myself</i> , cont'd.	
Week 11 Oct 26		Jennifer Crandall, "Whitman, Alabama"	Turn in Exercise 8
Oct 28		Kendrick Lamar, <i>good kid, m.A.A.d. city</i>	
Week 12 Nov 2		Beyoncé, <i>Lemonade</i>	Turn in reflection
Nov 4		Mia Ayumi Malhotra, <i>Isako Isako</i>	
Week 13 Nov 9	Conclusion	<i>Isako Isako</i> , cont'd.	
Nov 11		Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Ozymandias" Rita Dove, "Parsley" Talib Kweli, "Get By" Childish Gambino, "This is America" iMarkkeyz x DJ Suede The Remix God, "Lose Yo Job"	

Week 14			Turn in Take Home Final Exam by Nov 20, 4pm
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Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Conduct:

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” <https://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b/>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

Support Systems:

Student Counseling Services (SCS) - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call
 Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.
<https://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling/>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1-800-273-8255

Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

Relationship & Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-4900 - 24/7

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp/>

Sexual Assault Resource Center

For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: <http://sarc.usc.edu/>

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX compliance – (213) 740-5086

Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. <https://equity.usc.edu/>

Bias Assessment Response and Support

Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response. <https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support/>

Student Support & Advocacy – (213) 821-4710

Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic. <https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa/>

Diversity at USC – <https://diversity.usc.edu/> Tabs for Events, Programs and Training, Task Force (including representatives for each school), Chronology, Participate, Resources for Students

Behavior that persistently or grossly interferes with classroom activities is considered disruptive behavior and may be subject to disciplinary action. Such behavior inhibits other students’ ability to learn and an instructor’s ability to teach. A student responsible for disruptive behavior may be required to leave class pending discussion and resolution of the problem and may be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs for disciplinary action. These strictures may extend to behaviors outside the classroom that are related to the course.

Emergency Preparedness/Course Continuity in a Crisis

In case of a declared emergency if travel to campus is not feasible, USC executive leadership will

announce an electronic way for instructors to teach students in their residence halls or homes using a combination of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technologies.

Definition of Excellence in Teaching – USC Department of English

All writing is creative, and all civic engagement requires a sophisticated understanding of discourse and interpretation. The USC Department of English is committed to the power of the story, the word, and the image. We analyze and organize complex ideas, evaluate qualitative information, anticipate how real audiences respond to language, and study behaviors of complex characters leading uncertain lives with competing values. We develop critical abilities for a successful life, but our stories tell us why life is worth living.

Excellence in teaching is an active engagement with these commitments, perspectives, and values. A student with a major in **English** should graduate with an appreciation for (1) the relations between representation and the human soul, and (2) the relations between words and ideas. Teachers will encourage this appreciation through their knowledge and conveyance of the subject, the appropriateness of instructional materials, and the quality of their students' responses. We expect our students to:

- understand the major representations in English discourse from earliest beginnings to the current moment; all literatures exist in conversation with earlier literatures;
- organize and interpret evidence;
- feel the experiences of others, both by engaging in literatures and by their own efforts to create new literatures;
- understand how periods, cultural intentions, and literary genres differ;
- grasp the skills and theories of interpretation, and the history of our own discipline;
- see how interpretive interests shift with time and place;
- attend to linguistic details of semantics, phrasing, and structure;
- assume there are reasonable alternative understandings of a text;
- adjudicate differences through reasoned arguments that honestly engage counter-arguments.

Our students will have lives in very different arenas, but all calling for skills in discourse, empathy, civil argument, and civic engagement. We cannot and should not say what those careers will be; we train students for jobs that have not yet been invented.

English Department students with an interdisciplinary major in **Narrative Studies** should expect instruction that inculcates an appreciation for all of the above, and coordinates with definitions of teaching excellence in USC's corresponding departments.

The Department of English adheres to the modalities of instruction published in the "USC Definition of Excellence in Teaching."

Approved September 18, 2018
Undergraduate Studies
Committee
Department of English