

(Re)Writing History

American History in Film & Literature



Course Description

Quentin Tarantino's controversial *Django Unchained* (2012) has been attacked for its "historical inaccuracy." According to the critic Harvey Blume, "History seems to dumb Tarantino down, dull his imagination. The revenge, unfortunately, is on history, which in the process gets painfully dumbed down." Our class will explore the implications of this critique and the long lineage of creative works that, like *Django*, attempt to document, revise, or imagine alternatives to U.S. history. We will study films, fiction, and creative nonfiction that engage in history-making projects and examine how these efforts intersect with major social and political movements following World War II, when the United States grew from a regional power to a global colossus. We will ask, how do Ralph Ellison, Kurt Vonnegut, Stanley Kubrick, Shirley Clarke, Joan Didion, Don DeLillo, Quentin Tarantino, Claudia Rankine, and other leading writers and filmmakers represent figures, events, and periods from the nation's past? How does their work expand our understandings of "history" and encourage us to see the past (as well as the present)? To help answer these questions, we will also touch on criticism by Walter Benjamin, Tom Wolfe, Fredric Jameson, and Fred Moten and learn about the popular literary distinctions *postmodern* and *contemporary*.

Prof. Caitlin Cawley
caitlin.cawley@gmail.com

Office Hours:
TF 10-11:15 Dealy 525
M 5:30-6:30 Zoom

Texts & Contexts / ENGL 2000
Spring 2024
TF 11:30-12:45
Keating B19

Course Objectives

This course is designed to encourage you to read, write, and think critically. As we make our way through the rich collection of films and literary works, we will focus on some fundamental aspects of college-level writing, such as close reading, identifying problems, making defensible claims, supporting your claims with evidence and warrants, and exploring the motives for your writing. Additionally, by producing different types of scholarship and studying the primary texts in terms of their artistic and historical significance, you will develop a vocabulary and method for writing about film and literature.

Required Books

- Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)
 - Vintage Books / ISBN 978-0679732761
- Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969)
 - Dial Press / ISBN 978-0440180296
- Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (1977)
 - Vintage Books / ISBN 978-0679735250
- Don DeLillo, *Libra* (1988)
 - Penguin Books / ISBN 978-0140156041
- Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014)
 - Graywolf Press / ISBN 978-1555976903

Required Films (available on Amazon)

- Stanley Kubrick, *Doctor Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964)
- Shirley Clarke, *Portrait of Jason* (1967)
- Joel and Ethan Coen, *The Big Lebowski* (1998)
- Quentin Tarantino, *Django Unchained* (2012)
- Beyonce Knowles-Carter, *Lemonade* (2016) (watch on Apple Music or Tidal)

Readings (pdfs available on Blackboard)

- Joan Didion, "John Wayne: A Love Song," *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* (1968) and "The White Album," *The White Album* (1979)
- Michel Foucault, "The Repressive Hypothesis," *The History of Sexuality: Volume I* (1976)
- Tom Wolfe, "The Birth of 'New Journalism': An Eyewitness Reporter," *The New Journalism* (1973)
- Edward Said, "Two Visions in *Heart of Darkness*" and "Discrepant Experiences," *Culture and Imperialism* (1993)
- Fredric Jameson, "Introduction" and "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991)
- Fred Moten, "Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream," *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003)

Assignments and Grading Policy

Assignment	Percent of Final Grade	Notes
Attendance and Participation	20%	See below
Group Project & Presentation	20%	See GP via GoogleDoc
Midterm Close Reading Essay	20%	Due 3/8
Outreach Blog Post	10%	Due 4/9
Final Research Essay or Video Project	30%	Due 5/17

Attendance and Participation

Your attendance and participation are important. Great classes are built on a collective commitment to working together to formulate questions, share ideas (laughs, frustrations, challenges, etc.), develop special interests, expand our respective perspectives, debate different interpretations, and learn the subject matter. So come to class ready to participate! To participate, you will need to

1. read/watch the assigned text,
2. organize your thoughts about the work prior to our meeting,
3. bring the assigned text to class, and
4. listen to your classmates.

Participating in class and on Blackboard will take different shapes for different people, but to receive full credit for attendance and participation, you must attend class, share your ideas with the group, contribute to in-class activities, and engage with your classmates. To this last point, let's do our best to create an environment where everyone feels respected, valued, and included. As the thinker Judith Butler argues, "If I am to live a good life, it will be a life lived with others. I will not lose this I that I am; whoever I am will be transformed by my connections with others, since my dependency on another, and my dependability, are necessary in order to live and live well."

You will not be penalized for your first three absences or latenesses; thereafter, your final course grade will drop one grade for each day missed. Six or more absences may result in failure of the course per [Fordham's policy](#).

Extensions, Late Work, Emails, and Etiquette

Everyone is entitled to **one** extension over the course of the semester. If you need or want to use the extension, simply request it 24 hours before the deadline via email, and we can establish a new due date—typically two days after the original deadline. Unexcused late work will be marked down or not accepted.

If you have a question or an issue arises, sign up for office hours (or let me know after class -- I hang back at the end of the period for just this reason). You may also email me, but please note

that the best way to reach me is via office hours and our in-person meetings. When emailing me (or any professor), keep in mind that there is no time like the present to begin honing your email etiquette. Consider all messages professional correspondences and include subject headings, appropriate salutations, and minimal grammatical errors. This skill will be valuable throughout your career at Fordham and beyond.

Last but not least, I know we are still navigating the aftermath of a devastating global pandemic and that our lives have changed dramatically over the last four years. While learning about literature, film, and history is important, your health and well-being are my top priority. I am happy to make adjustments, so please ask for what you need. Communication is key (always but especially now), so please do not wait or be afraid to reach out to me after class or via office hours if an issue arises. Fordham's [Counseling and Psychological Services](#) is also an excellent resource. They offer free one-on-one appointments and group workshops to support your mental, psychological, and emotional health.

COVID-19

If you have to miss class because you **test positive for COVID** and are symptomatic, please

1. email/text/call your assigned class partner(s) to get notes from class;
2. sign up to meet with me during Zoom office hours on Monday;
3. post a 250-word reflection on the Blackboard Discussion Board *if* you have to miss **more than one class** because you are symptomatic; and
4. rest up and feel better!

Plagiarism and Academic Integrity

Participating in an academic conversation means learning from others and giving them credit for what you have learned. This skill is one of the great responsibilities and joys of writing. Moreover, plagiarism undermines the integrity of your work, our classroom, and our school. Therefore, plagiarism will not be tolerated. Evidence of plagiarism will result in an automatic zero for the assignment as well as a notification to the Dean's office and possibly failure of the course. For more information on Fordham University's policy on academic integrity, please consult your student handbook. Also, while we'll practice citing, synthesizing, and incorporating the work of others in class, please don't hesitate to reach out to me with questions about using outside sources!

Paper Submission and Formatting

Please submit an *electronic copy* of each assignment on Blackboard under the Content tab and bring a *hard copy* to class. Essays should be formatted according to MLA standards: double spaced; Times New Roman, 12-point font; header and title; citations and works cited page, etc. See *The Bedford Handbook for Writers* or [Purdue Owl Online Writing Lab](#) if you need a refresher. Fordham's [Writing Center](#) is also an excellent resource.

Mandatory Reporting

As a faculty member, I am a mandatory reporter. This means that if I observe, learn, or suspect that a student has experienced sexual or any other type of misconduct, I am obligated to report this information to Fordham's [Gender Equity & Title IX Office](#). This obligation extends to the work that you produce in this class. The system is part of Fordham's commitment to supporting you and ensuring that misconduct stops and does not happen again.

Commitment to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

One of my goals is to make this course inclusive, equitable, and explicitly antiracist by supporting the vital truth of Black Lives Matter and its charge to all of us to recognize biases, confront privilege, and labor toward justice for all Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). During this semester, we will strive to be courageous and empathetic when we navigate difficult topics and discuss complex issues related to racial and other intersectional forms of social justice.

As part of this effort, we will answer [Toni Morrison](#)'s challenge to ensure that oppressive language is "rejected, altered and exposed." This means disavowing speech that attempts to silence, threaten, and degrade others and communicating in ways that are inclusive of individuals and groups regardless of race, sex, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, national origin, political affiliation, disability, religion, appearance, and more. For example, we will use gender-inclusive and non-sexist language, which avoids misgendering people, and recognizes the distinction between biological sex and gender expression, as well as one another's chosen name and preferred pronouns. Similarly, we will not repeat racial slurs even when we watch a film or read a text that includes them. This choice shows respect to all the people who have been subjected to hate speech and acknowledges the history and violence of this language. Last, like everyone, I am still in the process of learning about diverse perspectives and identities. If something is said in class by me or a classmate that makes you feel uncomfortable, please talk to me about it or provide anonymous feedback via Blackboard.

Disability Services

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, all students, with or without disabilities, are entitled to equal access to the programs and activities at our university. If you believe that you have a disabling condition that may interfere with your ability to participate in the activities, coursework, or assessment of the object of this course, you may be entitled to accommodations. Please schedule an appointment to speak with someone at the [Office of Disability Services](#).

Please Note

This course includes disturbing, discriminatory, and violent content. My goal is to cultivate sensitive discussions and an empathetic classroom environment, and we will work together to identify and critique racism, homophobia, misogyny, ableism, and other forms of discrimination and cruelty. That said, please email me if you want further information on how these topics will be covered or for assistance in switching into a class that suits you better at this time.

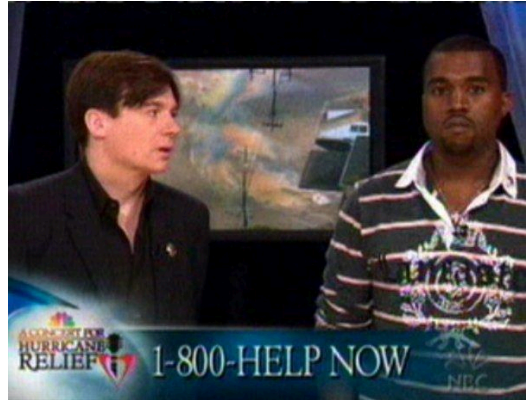
Course Schedule

Please note: The schedule is subject to change. See Blackboard for updates.

Week 1

Introduction: "From This Day We Move Forward"

Let's start at the beginning (of our course, that is): the United States in 1945. To situate ourselves in the social, intellectual, and political climate in the U.S. immediately following WWII, we'll examine a passage from Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940) alongside Harry Truman's 1949 inaugural address, known as the "Four Point Speech." We will also discuss Kanye West's response to the Hurricane Katrina relief efforts to set up some key questions for the course, including what counts as "historic"? How does an event become national history? And why might a writer or filmmaker be interested in reimagining figures, episodes, and periods from America's past?



Jan 16: No reading due

UNIT I / Weeks 1-5

Questioning the "Free" World: Counternarratives and Cold War America, 1950s-60s

Jan 19: Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Prologue-Chapter 1)

- Sign-up for Digital Group Project (via Blackboard under Announcements) before class

Jan 23: *Invisible Man* (Chapters 2-6)

Jan 26: *Invisible Man* (Chapters 7-11)

Jan 30: *Invisible Man* (Chapters 24-Epilogue)

- Group 1 Presentation

Feb 2: Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five* (Chapters 1-4)

Feb 6: *Slaughterhouse* (Chapters 5-7)

- Group 2 Presentation

Feb 9: *Slaughterhouse Five* (Chapters 9-10)

- Screening *Doctor Strangelove* @ 5:30 PM in Walsh Auditorium

Feb 13: Stanley Kubrick, *Doctor Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*

- Group 3 Presentation

UNIT II / Weeks 5-9

Getting at the Truth: New Journalism and the Counterculture, 1960s-70s

Feb 16: Tom Wolfe, "The Birth of 'New Journalism': An Eyewitness Reporter"; Joan Didion, "The White Album"

Feb 20: "The White Album"

- Group 4 Presentation

Feb 23: Shirley Clarke, *Portrait of Jason*

- Group 5 Presentation

Feb 27: *Portrait of Jason*

- Synchronous Virtual Class / Please see Blackboard for Zoom link

March 1: Michael Herr, "Breathing In," *Dispatches*

March 5: Herr, "Colleagues," *Dispatches*

March 8: No Class

- Midterm Close Reading Essay Due

March 12: Herr, "Breathing Out," *Dispatches*

UNIT III / Weeks 10-12

Living Outside History: Postmodernism and Late Capitalism, 1980s-90s



March 15: Don DeLillo, *Libra* (Part I)

March 19: *Libra* (Part I)

- Group 6 Presentation

March 21-April 1: No Class / Spring Break

April 2: *Libra* (Part II)

April 5: Joel and Ethan Coen, *The Big Lebowski*

April 9: *The Big Lebowski*; Fredric Jameson, "Introduction" and "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,"

Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1991)

- Outreach Blog Post Due

Unit IV / Weeks 12-15

Dissenting Now: Alternative Archives for "Post-Racial" America, 2000s-present

April 12: Quentin Tarrantino, *Django Unchained*

- Optional Reading: Fred Moten, "Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream"

April 16: Claudia Rankine, *Citizen* (5-51)

April 19: *Citizen* (52-95)

- Group 7 Presentation

April 23: *Citizen* (96-160)



- Please come prepared to share your research question and outline for the final project

April 26: Jonas Åkerlund, Kahlil Joseph, Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, Melina Matsoukas, Dikayl Rimmasch, Mark Romanek, and Todd Torso, *Lemonade* (2016)

April 30: Last Day of Class / Reading TBA

Finals /Weeks 16-18

*No final exam, only a final project to be submitted on Blackboard. I will hold extended office hours for individual meetings

Friday, May 17: Final Project due by 11:59 PM