

Literature and the Social Contract: Rights, Representation, Resistance

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Office Hours: TBD



Our landscape is its own monument: its meaning can only be traced on the underside. It is all history.

—Édouard Glissant

Tutorial Description

In 1961, Robert Frost approached the podium at John F. Kennedy's inauguration to deliver a poem he had composed for the occasion. He could not, however, read his own writing in the glare of the sun. He therefore recited from memory an earlier poem, "The Gift Outright," beginning with the familiar chiasmus, "The land was ours before we were the land's." Given the occasion of the poem, given its central paradox, what *was* Frost's gift outright? "Something we were withholding made us weak / Until we found out that it was ourselves / We were withholding from our land of living..."

Frost speaks of self-government, property, and that slippery word, representation (artistic, legal, political). In this course, we will discuss the letter of the law as manifested in modern literature, from contemporary poetry to novels to film. What does it mean to be born the citizen of a nation, and yet not to possess the full rights of citizenry? How does one express, let alone reverse, such a condition—formally, as an artist, and formally, as an activist? How does one compel the belief of others to enforce these rights, or testify to the condition of statelessness? These poets and thinkers remind us that laws, like poems, like fiction, consist of words; it is by their enactment that they protect or harm.

In this tutorial, we will begin to answer these questions as we watch artists express, perform, and resist the dispossession at the heart of "the right to have rights." In three units, we will follow three basic lines of inquiry, which allow us to investigate the theme of the literary social contract:

- How does the artist formally describe, or enact, the right to have rights, or its absence? How is this most compellingly performed, and what is the telos of such literary expression? How is literary activism put to the test?
- How does the history of contemporary literature dovetail with the history of the social contract? How do we see representations of interiority develop alongside the concept of “natural rights”? Who is paradoxically at the center of, and excluded from, these theories, and how does art supplement the law?
- How do we imagine the future of rights— who or what has them, who does not?—and how is literature a technology for such projections? How does the history of literature and the law bear on the future we face together?

Tutorial Goals

To introduce social contract theory as a political lens through which to consider the expression of human interiority and collectivity across time, media, and space. You will be able to:

- Identify different scholarly methods and place them in dialogue with texts, other methods, and your own thoughts
- Close-read comparatively across different artistic media and historical periods, utilizing appropriate terminology and concepts for each analytical discipline
- Articulate how the historical, cultural, and political contexts of a moment impacts what authors can say, how they say it, and why

General Goals

To introduce the discipline and practice of English literary studies at an upper-division level, & to write 20-25pp research paper in preparation for an honors thesis. You will be able to:

- Choose a topic and ask productive research questions
- Develop a critical bibliography around research questions, incorporating diverse methods and viewpoints
- Put secondary criticism in conversation with your own ideas and with other criticism
- Hone, edit, and organize existing drafts in individual and collaborative settings
- Write with greater clarity and precision

Assignments

Short Essay (Week 4, 10%): A 5-7 page paper, an extended close reading of a primary text; this will be followed by an individual student conference to discuss the paper

Prospectus & Annotated Bibliography (Week 6, 15%): a two page prospectus of the project, outlining its general context and argument. An annotated bibliography of 8-10 sources should accompany the prospectus. The bibliography should reproduce in a few sentences the main argument of the work you intend to make use of. It should also include, in a few sentences, how you plan on engaging with the thesis of the work you have summarized.

Final Paper (Reading Period, 45%): 20-25 page paper on a major literary work *not* read in this class; please incorporate at least three critical articles and consider, as you plan your draft, more than one methodological perspective.

Conference Presentation (ungraded but required): a 5-minute paper on their research

Participation & Preparation (20%): A small seminar like this one thrives only when you have read and thought about the texts – be they novels or documentaries - before we've met.

Minor Assignments (10%):

- Response Papers (2): Twice during the semester, students will compose one-page mini essays responding to that week's primary and secondary sources, which will be used as discussion starters. Students will choose the weeks of their response papers in advance. Due by email by 5pm the evening before seminar.

Fields We'll Cover

Political/Social Theory—

Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception*. University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New ed., Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966.

Butler, Judith. *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Harvard University Press, 2015. (Also performance theory)

DeGooyer, Stephanie. *The Right to Have Rights*. 2018.

Mbembe, Achille. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2003, pp. 11–40. (Also postcolonial theory)

Theory of the Novel—

Slaughter, Joseph R. *Human Rights, Inc. The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*. 1st ed., Fordham University Press, 2007.

Critical Race Theory—

Hartman, Saidiya. "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors." *Souls: Black Women's Labor: Economics, Culture, and Politics*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2016, pp. 166–173. (Also feminist theory)

Rutter, Emily Ruth. "Contested Lineages: Fred Moten, Terrance Hayes, and the Legacy of Amiri Baraka." *African American Review*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2016, pp. 329–342.

Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Duke University Press, 2014. (Also feminist theory)

Queer Theory—

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York University Press, 2009. (Also performance theory)

Radi, Blas. "On Trans Epistemology." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2019, pp. 43–63.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, and Adam Frank. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Duke University Press, 2003.

Trauma Theory—

Gilmore, Leigh. "Jurisdictions: I, Rigoberta Menchú, The Kiss, and Scandalous Self-Representation in the Age of Memoir and Trauma." *Signs*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2003, pp. 695–718. (Also feminist theory)

Feminist Theory—

Mackinnon, Catharine A. "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence." *Signs*, vol. 8, no. 4, 1983, pp. 635–658.

Ecocriticism—

Deloughrey, Elizabeth. "Heavy Waters: Waste and Atlantic Modernity." *PMLA*, vol. 125, no. 3, 2010, pp. 703–712.

Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

Scarry, Elaine. *Thermonuclear Monarchy: Choosing between Democracy and Doom*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2014. (also political theory)
Yusoff, Kathryn. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. University of Minnesota Press, 2018.

Required Texts

Betts, Reginald Dwayne. *Felon*. W.W. Norton & Co., 2019.
Butler, Octavia E. *Kindred*. Beacon Press, 1988.
Charles, Jos. *feeld*. Milkweed Editions, 2018.
Gloeckner, Phoebe. *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures*. North Atlantic Books, 2015.
Hayes, Terrance. *American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin*. Penguin Books, 2018.
Hong, Cathy Park. *Engine Empire*. W.W. Norton & Co., 2012.
Kincaid, Jamaica. *A Small Place*. Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2000.
Long Soldier, Layli. *Whereas*. Graywolf Press, 2017.
Martinez, J. Michael. *Museum of the Americas*. Penguin, 2018.
Pico, Tommy. *Nature Poem*. Tin House Books, 2017.
Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: an American Lyric*. Graywolf Press, 2014.
Sharif, Solmaz. *Look: Poems*. Graywolf Press, 2016.
Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Ceremony*. Viking Press, 1977.
Zamora, Javier. *Unaccompanied*. Copper Canyon Press, 2017.

SCHEDULE OF CLASSES/READINGS

* denotes that I will provide pdfs on the course website

** denotes that the article or book is available via HOLLIS

Lyric and the Right to Have Rights

Week 1: Who Enforces Human Rights?

Solmaz Sharif, *Look*

Reginald Dwayne Betts, *Felon*

Stephanie de Gooyer, Chapter 1 from *The Right to Have Rights**

Hannah Arendt, Chapter 9 from *The Origins of Totalitarianism**

General Tutorial Meeting – Kresge Room (X date)

Week 2: Performative Rights, Performative Rejections

Layli Long Soldier, *Whereas*

Terrance Hayes, *American Sonnet for my Past and Future Assassin*

Judith Butler, Introduction and Chapter 1 from *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly**

Emily Ruth Rutter, "Contested Lineages: Fred Moten, Terrance Hayes, and the Legacy of Amiri Baraka"***

Assignment: "Anatomy of an Article Pt. 1: After completing "Contested Lineages," the assigned article by Rutter, summarize its argument in 1-3 sentences and attempt to identify its academic "field" and critical method.

Week 3: Individualism, Collectivity, and Totality

Javier Zamora, *Unaccompanied*

Tommy Pico, *Nature Poem*

Giorgio Agamben, from *State of Exception**

Assignment: "Anatomy of an Article" Pt 2: Bring a peer-reviewed academic article related to a text or theme from this unit; summarize its argument in 1-3 sentences, and identify its academic "field" and critical method. Explain your reasoning.

Week 4: The Social Contract and the Body

J Michael Martinez, *Museum of the Americas*

Claudia Rankine, *Citizen*

Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics" (the article, in lieu of the full book)**

Discussion of Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography

Short Essay Due Friday at 5pm (by email)

Consent and the Social Contract

Week 5: History of the Novel as the History of the Social Contract

Aphra Behn, *The Dumb Virgin: Or, the Force of Imagination***

Samuel Richardson, from *Clarissa**

John Locke, Chapters 1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 15 from *Second Treatise of Government***

Joseph Slaughter, Introduction from *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law***

Strongly recommended, but optional: Julia Rudolph, "Rape and Resistance: Women and Consent in 17th Century English Legal and Political Thought"***

Week 6: Library Visit

Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography due by Friday at 5pm (by email)

Working Drafts to be Discussed in Class

General Tutorial Meeting – Kresge Room (x date)

Week 7: Rape and Property, Rape as Property

Octavia Butler, *Kindred*

Saidiya Hartman, “The Belly of the World”**

Alexander G. Weheliye, Chapter 5, *Habeas Viscus**

Week 8: Victim as Defendant

Phoebe Gloeckner, *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*

Leigh Gilmore, “Jurisdictions: I, Rigoberta Menchú, The Kiss, and Scandalous Self-Representation in the Age of Memoir and Trauma”**

Catherine A. MacKinnon, “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence”**

Week 9: In-Class Draft Workshops

Draft due the evening before class by 5pm

Students are expected to read one others’ drafts for workshop

Week 10: Reading is Fundamental –Aporias within Aporias

(film) Jennie Livingston, *Paris is Burning*

Jos Charles, *feeld*

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You”**

José Muñoz, Chapter 1, from *Cruising Utopia***

Strongly recommended, but optional: Blas Radi, “On Trans* Epistemology”**

Enter the Anthropocene

Week 11: Thermonuclear Reservations

Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*

Ray Bradbury, “There Will Come Soft Rains”*

Elaine Scarry, Chapter 5 from *Thermonuclear Monarchy**

Short In-Class Draft Workshop – updated draft due at 5 pm, the night before class

Week 12: Tidalectics

Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place*

Edwidge Danticat, “Children of the Sea”*

Elizabeth DeLoughry, “Heavy Waters: Waste and Atlantic Modernity”**

Kathryn Yusoff, Chapter 1, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None**

Week 13: Projecting a Future

Cathy Park Hong, *Engine Empire*
Timothy Morton, Chapter 1 from *Hyperobjects***

Final drafts due TBD

Tutorial Conference TBD, Thompson Room, 10 am

Academic Honesty: Plagiarism is the use of another person's ideas or writing without giving them proper credit. Consequences of plagiarism can range from failure on the paper to dismissal from the course to even more serious actions. You are responsible for familiarizing yourself with Harvard FAS's Honor Code: "*Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one's own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs.*"

Collaboration: You are absolutely encouraged to talk with other students about the course and its readings, and to read each others' work. In individual assignments (which may include midterm or term papers, short writing assignments, homework or reading questions and responses, or take-home exams), academic collaboration and external sources should be always cited.

Attendance: Your attendance in tutorial is necessary to your own success as well as to the success of the class as a whole; so is your attendance in Junior Tutorial General Meetings and at other required events. Each student is allowed one unexcused absence. Missing more than one class will decrease your participation grade, and excessive absence could result in failing the course. Also, being late really disrupts the work we're doing together: 2 lates = 1 absence. If you have attenuating circumstances, please communicate with me in a timely manner so that we can discuss how to deal with it.

Due Dates & Late Grades: Unless otherwise specified, assignments are due by 11:59pm on the date listed in the schedule. Late assignments will be docked 1/3 letter grade per day, except for the final paper, which must be turned in before the due date. Students failing to turn in a final paper, or turning it in late without an official excuse, will fail the tutorial. If, well in advance of an assignment, you expect you will need an extension, please talk with me.

Email: I'll use our course listserv to distribute important info throughout the semester—from emailing you handouts to adjusting assignments and deadlines. You are responsible for checking your email on a daily basis. If you have a question that you need to ask me by email, be sure to give me at least 24 hours, or you may not get a response until it's too late. Also, please let me know if you'd like to use a non-Harvard email address.

Accommodations for students with disabilities: "*Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the [Accessible Education Office](#) (AEO) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term. Failure to do so may result in the Course Head's inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential, although Faculty are invited to contact AEO to discuss appropriate implementation.*"