

Interpreting Truths in Human Rights Literature

Undergraduate first-year seminar in English/Comparative Literature

Course Description

Can a novel provide evidence of a crime? What kinds of truths do fiction and poetry convey, as compared to memoir, testimony -- or to reportage? In this course, we will turn our attention to various forms of writing, speech, and performance that document violence and atrocity in the late 20th century. Our central project will be to explore different modes of interpreting these complex works of art: speaking and listening, reading and writing, watching and performing. How do we understand testimony when it is spoken, drawn, enacted -- or withheld? How do different interpretive approaches lead us to understand certain narratives as true or truthful, and others as false or misleading? And how might utilizing a range of interpretive strategies help us come to a richer, deeper understanding of the violations to which these works of art testify?

Central Questions:

- What is at stake -- politically, ethically, socially, legally -- in interpreting works of art that represent recent or ongoing violence?
- How does the reader/viewer's position in the world inflect both the interpretive strategies she draws on, and the interpretations that she comes to?
- What types of cultural production are recognized as possessing truth value, in what contexts, and by whom?
- Considering all of the above, how might we understand the desire -- evident in human rights reports and literature alike -- to document, to tell the truth, and to speak truth to power?

Student Responsibilities

1. *Attendance.* Plan to attend all classes and read/watch/explore all assignments in time to participate thoughtfully in class discussion.
2. *Participation.* Class discussion is a central part of the course; I will notice and give credit for thoughtful, informed contributions. Note that listening carefully to your classmates is also an important form of participation for all students.
3. *Writing.* This class requires that you write two short papers (4-5 pgs). These papers should offer a sustained analysis of a brief passage or moment in one of the texts/films we have studied. The goal here is to develop your own compelling interpretation -- taking into account the ambiguities and silences of your chosen object. We'll talk in detail about these assignments as they approach.
4. *Final Project.* This might be a longer critical paper (5-7 pgs), or it might be a creative project of your choosing. Poetry, short stories, visual art, audio/video creations, performance -- all fair game. Mid-way through the semester, you'll submit a brief proposal for your proposed final

project. Depending on the nature of the project, we'll work together to figure out criteria for evaluation.

Required Texts

The syllabus, course description, requirements, assignments, and links to resources are available on CourseWorks: <https://courseworks.columbia.edu/> Shorter readings will also be posted on Courseworks. In addition, you will need copies of the following books, all of which are available in Columbia's library:

- *Whereas* by Layli Long Soldier
- *Anil's Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje
- *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi
- *Look* by Solmaz Sharif
- *Regarding the Pain of Others* by Susan Sontag

Grading

Grades for this course will be calculated as follows:

- First short paper: 20%
- Second short paper: 25%
- Final project: 35%
- Attendance and participation: 20%

Course Schedule

Prelude

Week 1: Truth and interpretation

In-class reading: South African TRC on definitions of truth, from Vol. 1, Chap. 5
A Devastating, Overdue National Memorial to Lynching Victims, Alexis Okeowo

Week 2: The rise of the rights paradigm

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights
The Last Utopia (Chaps. 2 & 4), Samuel Moyn
"Literature," the "Rights of Man," and Narratives of Atrocity: Historical Backgrounds to the Culture of Testimony, Julie Peters

Part 1: Speaking & Listening

Week 3: Life narrative in words and images

Persepolis, Marjane Satrapi (graphic memoir)
Persepolis, Marjane Satrapi & Vincent Paronnaud (film)
Postcolonial Life Narrative, Introduction, Gillian Whitlock

Week 4: Testimony, *testimonio*, and the listener

I, Rigoberta Menchú, Elisabeth Burgos-Debray & Rigoberta Menchú (selections)
“Jurisdictions and Testimonial Networks” from *Tainted Witness*, Leigh Gilmore

Week 5: Truth and reconciliation

South African TRC report, Introduction (brief selections)
South African TRC report, Women’s Hearings (brief selections)
Long Night’s Journey Into Day (dir. Reid and Hoffman)
Ambiguities of Witnessing (Chap. 3), Mark Sanders

Week 6: Belated narration: when do stories become tellable?

Asian Women’s Fund, “[Testimonies of the Victims](#)”
Human Rights and Narrated Lives (chap 5), S. Smith & K. Shaffer

Part 2: Reading & Writing

Week 7: Reporting human rights abuses

Playing with Fire, Sangtin Writers Collective
Selections from 2-3 recent Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reports
NB: We’ll choose the reports together based on class interests/current events

--First Short Paper Due In Class--

Week 8: The human rights novel

Anil’s Ghost, Michael Ondaatje
Amnesty International 1992 reports on disappearances (pick 2-3 to read)
“National Myth, Transnational Memory: Ondaatje’s Archival Method,” Aarthi Vadde

Week 9: Redaction, elision, silence: reading for absences

Look, Solmaz Sharif
Whereas, Layli Long Soldier
“[Protect, Protect](#),” Jenny Holzer at the Whitney Museum of Art (2009)
U.S. Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms

Part 3: Performing & Watching

Week 10: Is a picture worth a thousand words?

Regarding the Pain of Others, Susan Sontag
“Staging the Modern Ruin,” Ateya Khorakiwala

--Final Project Proposal Due In Class--

Week 11: "Based on a true story"

Zero Dark Thirty (dir. Kathryn Bigelow)

"The Black Sites" + "Zero Conscience in *Zero Dark Thirty*," Jane Mayer

"The torturer as feminist?" Gabrielle Simm

Week 12: Mapping: the view from nowhere?

"Introduction" & "Kosovo 1999" from *Close Up at a Distance*, Laura Kurgan

"Feminist visualization: re-envisioning GIS as a method in feminist geographic research,"

Mei-Po Kwan

Explore some examples from [Satellite Imagery for Human Rights Monitoring](#)

--Second Short Paper Due In Class--

Week 13: Embodying trauma without the body

Ubu and the Truth Commission (Handspring Puppet Theater & Jane Taylor)

A video of the full performance is available on YouTube. You may choose to *also* read the script, but your first priority is to watch the performance!

Shattered Voices (Chaps 5 & 6), Theresa Phelps

Week 14: Perpetrators, guilt, and the body

The Act of Killing (dir. Joshua Oppenheimer)

Interview with Joshua Oppenheimer in *Cinéaste*

"Referred Pain: *The Act of Killing* and the Production of a Crime Scene," Janet Walker

"Tracing Frictions in *The Act of Killing*," Intan Paramaditha

Epilogue

Week 15: Limits of the human rights paradigm

One brief text TBD, selected by class.

--Final Project due Dec. 15th--

Useful Resources

The Writing Center

I encourage you to visit the Writing Center (310 Philosophy Hall), where you can receive free individual consultations on your writing at any stage in the writing process, including brainstorming. Writing consultants work with all members of the Columbia community on any academic or nonacademic writing. You can make an appointment and view drop in hours on their website: [\[www.college.columbia.edu/core/uwp/writing-center\]](http://www.college.columbia.edu/core/uwp/writing-center).

Counseling and Psychological Services

The Office of Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) [\[http://www.health.columbia.edu/cps/index.html\]](http://www.health.columbia.edu/cps/index.html) provides many kinds of support for student wellness and academic success. I encourage all of you to take your mental health as seriously as your physical health.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

Columbia University provides students who register with the Office of Disability Services (ODS) [\[http://www.health.columbia.edu/ods/news/ds-programs.html\]](http://www.health.columbia.edu/ods/news/ds-programs.html) with a range of support options and will provide you with a letter stating the accommodations to which you are entitled, without disclosing any other information about you. If you know or believe you have a disability of some kind, please consult with Disability Services and your advising dean as soon as possible.

First-Generation Low-Income Partnership

Columbia FLIP is a “student organization aimed at creating safe spaces for those who identify as first-generation and/or low-income,” including projects like shared meal swipes and a textbook library. Get in touch at <http://facebook.com/columbiaflip/> or @Columbia_FLIP.

Support for Survivors of Sexual Assault, Violence, and Harassment

It is important that you know that I, like all of your instructors, am a mandated reporter. This means that if you inform me of an incident of sexual misconduct, I am obligated to report it to the Office of Gender-Based Misconduct. I am committed to support for survivors, but if you do not want a report filed, the five resources listed below will keep anything you say confidential:

Peer Advocacy: (212) 854-HELP (4357)

<http://health.columbia.edu/sexual-violence-response>

Ombuds Office: 212-854-1234

<http://ombuds.columbia.edu/>

Counseling and Psychological Services: 212-854-2878

<http://www.health.columbia.edu/cps/index.html>

Medical Services: 212-305-3400

<https://health.columbia.edu/medical-services>

Office of the University Chaplain: 212-854-1493, chaplain@columbia.edu

<http://ouc.columbia.edu/>

All of the above information is from Columbia’s website sexualrespect.columbia.edu, which I encourage you to visit.