

## Joshua Schriftman:

# Teaching Philosophy and Evidence of Teaching Excellence

Please find below a statement of my teaching philosophy and an explanation of my assignment sequences. Also included are sample syllabi, assignments, a grade sheet, and student evaluations from two of my courses. I have no access to further official evaluative materials, but upon request I could send a package of anonymous feedback surveys I personally distributed in one of my recent classes. Additionally, if you would like to see student papers, more assignments, other syllabi, writing exercises, draft workshop guidelines, rosters, or anything else, please let me know. Again, thank you for your consideration.

### Table of Contents

Teaching Philosophy.....	2
Explanation of Assignment Sequences.....	4
English 101: <i>Critical Literacy</i> (Summer 2005). Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC), Main Campus. Syllabus and Course Policies.....	5
English 101 (Summer 2005). Essay assignment #1.....	8
English 101 (Summer 2005). Essay assignment #2.....	10
English 101 (Summer 2005). Essay assignment #3.....	12
Trumping Binaries.....	14
English 102: <i>Working Literacy</i> (Spring 2005). CCAC, Main Campus. Syllabus.....	15
English 102 (Spring 2005). Essay assignment #1.....	18
English 102 (Spring 2005). Collaborative presentation (Assignment #2).....	20
English 102 (Spring 2005). Essay assignment #3.....	22
English 101 (Summer 2005). Grade sheet.....	25
<i>Travel Writing from the Margins</i> (Spring 2008). Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI). Syllabus.....	26
<i>Travel Writing from the Margins</i> (Spring 2008). Presentation instructions.....	29
<i>The Travel Essay</i> (Fall 2008). OLLI. Syllabus.....	31
<i>The Travel Essay</i> (Fall 2008). Writing Assignment.....	33
Official student feedback for OLLI, Spring 2008 courses.....	sent in separate attachment
Official student feedback for OLLI, Fall 2008 courses.....	sent in separate attachment

## **Statement of Teaching Philosophy**

The central goal of my teaching is to help students develop the ability to critically read a text and to express their thoughts clearly and powerfully in their writing. It's a simple goal, but one that is more ambitious than it may at first sound. A *text*, for instance, is not just a selection from an anthology. It is the anthology itself; the requirements of MLA formatting; the magazine ad with the sexy lady and the hard man; and the media treatment of Rihanna and Chris Brown—or of Elizabeth Smart, Laci Peterson, and Natalee Holloway. Texts surround us. *Critical reading* happens when a student reads a text against its grain—when a student reads actively, with an oppositional rather than passive eye. A critical reading helps a student understand his or her own relationship to a text. And to *express*? That word is a placeholder. I believe that we know how to think critically only by writing our thoughts and then reflecting upon our writing. The kind of expression I value comes toward the end of a long process.

A typical day in one of my composition classrooms begins with a directed free write. On some days, this might be intended to generate material for discussion. (In *"To Kill an Elephant,"* I might write in an assignment, *George Orwell feels forced to act against his own will; he feels oppressed by the people he is meant to be oppressing. Can you remember a time when a parent/teacher/oppressor—possibly you, possibly someone else—has somehow become burdened, dominated, or tyrannized by her or his role?*) Having developed personal stakes in our readings, students can then join in a discussion built on solid claims supported by specific evidence. On other days, the free write is designed to get students engaged with the act of writing. (*Vividly describe your favorite place in the world, but do it using no adverbs or adjectives: No "Starry skies" allowed, but try instead "skies of sable with pinpricks of light"*). By helping my students become conscious of the choices they're making as writers, I also help them to de-familiarize the commonplaces of their imagination, and to become better writers. Other exercises are designed to help students de-familiarize common patterns of thought (see "Trumping Binaries" on p. 14).

After a discussion of the exercise and a student reading or two, the remainder of the class unfolds. My students raise their hands, as I've found the overeager ones can silence the reticent ones, who are, too often, the underprivileged ones. Occasionally I will deliver a lecture at this juncture: Standard MLA formatting; plagiarizing and copyright law; the rhetorical triangle; classical rhetorical tropes; or background information on our texts and authors. Lectures don't happen often, but I do believe in their efficacy when the information at hand is succinct and reasonably objective. Two or three times each semester we workshop our drafts in pairs or in small groups, and once every semester (or more depending on the course) we visit the library as a class to learn about research techniques. I typically cancel one class so that my students may meet me for one-on-one conferences, and, depending on the course, a week or so is devoted to presentations of student work toward the end of the semester.

Although no texts are central to all of my composition classes, certain readings do show up often: The Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address, Baldwin's "Letter to my Nephew," Orwell's "The Principles of Newspeak," Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's "Decolonising the Mind," *Boys Don't Cry*, King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Sylvia Plath's "Daddy," David Byrne on "World Music," and Harlon Dalton on Horatio Alger. Depending upon the class and its students, I also teach from Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and Roland Barthes's *Mythologies*. These readings help us to establish a language

with which we can begin the work of critical analysis that our major assignments demand. (For these assignments, please see either my guide to assignment sequences on page four or the assignments themselves, which are also included below.)

When I grade my students' major assignments, I play the role of gatekeeper: you will not pass my class if you cannot do the work. I give copious feedback, but I do not cut slack; typically, 'A's are very difficult to achieve. At the same time, when I am with my students I play the role of supporter and advocate: I will do everything I can to help them do the work. Whether students ultimately perform well or poorly in my classes, they are rarely mystified by the grades they've earned.

Of course, not everything works perfectly. I have occasionally given assignments that students have found too challenging, or assignments that provide students with too little—or too much—guidance. I have overestimated the amount my students could read, and I have underestimated their grasp of comma usage. My approach to teaching—much like my students' writing—is a process. Every class I teach in turn teaches me, and I look forward to continuing to learn how to teach for the rest of my career.

## **Explanation of Assignment Sequences and Other Materials**

Although I hope the aims and intentions of these materials are transparent, I offer this gloss to contextualize my work and to provide you with a brief guide.

**English 101: *Critical Literacy*.** The goal of this course was to help my students write critically and analytically about the world around them. Assignment #1 instructs students to perform a critical reading of the roles they've been asked to play in their lives. While a small percentage of students typically resist this assignment, it sets the tone for the rest of the course and helps most students engage. Assignment #2 centers on civil rights. It employs the critical skills my students learned in their first assignment, but also incorporates an element of research and expands the scope of the course beyond their personal horizons. Assignment #3 finishes the course by asking students to use their critical and research skills to address the larger cultural trends that allow oppression to persist. The texts used in these assignments include Baldwin's "Letter to my Nephew", Thiong'o's "Decolonizing the Mind," Sylvia Plath's "Daddy," and *Boys Don't Cry*. Many more of the texts we used are mentioned below in the assignments themselves.

I have also included a writing exercise called "Trumping Binaries." Like many of the writing exercises I assign, it was designed to help students get past the clichés of language and logic.

**English 102: *Working Literacy*.** I designed this course to help develop my students' ability to independently engage in literary analysis. While first-year students may arrive at college with diverse sets of skills and challenges, I've found that many of my students need help in this area. Assignment #1 develops research skills, and it gives me a chance to help my students with their expository writing style. Assignment #2 diverges from a typical composition assignment and asks students to study a school of criticism and to work collaboratively to deliver a well-researched presentation and annotated bibliography to their fellow students. Assignment #3 asks students to use any combination of the critical tools assessed in Assignment #2 in order to offer an analysis of a particular theme or aspect of Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, which we read and discussed in class. Assignments number two and three were very challenging for my students, but for the most part they rose to the occasion and embraced a literary experience not offered in other composition classes.

**Grade sheet:** My grade sheet is specifically designed to be self-explanatory, but I mention it here because it is such an important part of how I teach. The sheet allows me to simultaneously offer critique and support, showing my students exactly where they've lost points on their compositions but also providing lots of room for earned praise. "Grammar and Mechanics," for instance, exists at the bottom of the grade sheet and can only cost students points, but in the "Comments" and "Style" space I can describe what my students are doing well. This sheet gives me the opportunity to communicate with my students in a way that they respond to and seem to appreciate.

**Osher Courses:** The two courses I taught for the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute are also included below. Both courses were not for credit and the workload was relatively light. That said, my "Writing the Travel Essay" students cared deeply about their projects and challenged themselves accordingly. And, in "Travel Writing from the Margins," which centered on travel writing from underrepresented groups, I found that only by asking my students to read a great deal could I give them even a hint of the actual diversity of published travel literature. In the end, they responded very well to my demands, and I found their final presentations and our class discussions intriguing. I have included with this portfolio student feedback from these courses.

# English 101: Critical Literacy

Joshua Schriftman  
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Class times: Tu/Th 9:00-11:00  
Summer 2005

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**English 101:  
Critical  
Literacy**

Welcome to English 101.

This class will make three basic demands of you:

- 1) Do your assigned readings.
- 2) Actively participate in the class discussions involving these readings.
- 3) Complete the associated writing assignments.

These three demands will entail a certain amount of work and discipline on your behalf, especially because this is an accelerated 10-week course. I'll go into the details of what I'll be asking of you below.

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**Reading  
Texts**

Just about everything can be read—not just the little black squiggles on white paper you're looking at now. You can read the look on someone's face. You can read an advertisement in a magazine, even if it has no words. You can read the layout in a doctor's waiting room. You can read the stated responsibilities of a given job or the clothes of a given profession. Everything tells a story, and if you know how to read it then you can start to understand what that thing means. What's more, you can start to understand how it affects you and those around you.

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**Part I:  
Identity**

The first part of this class will be personal. We will consider the idea of *self*, and the social pressures that affect this idea. We will look at texts written by and about people who are struggling to be—and to know—who they are. Your first paper will be about your own struggles. In some ways, this will be your hardest paper: it's not easy to write about yourself. This might also be your easiest paper, though; you're already the authority on your life, so little outside research will be necessary.

**Part II:  
Expanding  
Your Scope**

The second part of this class will look at specific issues of oppression elsewhere in the United States. We will move from a discussion of our own struggle with identity to other individuals' struggles, and your second paper will do the same. While using the same analytic skills you developed in your first paper, your second paper will require you to do some research and to develop a more professional tone.

**Part III:  
America**

The third part of this class will expand your scope even more. We will look at the specific cultural mechanisms that allow oppression to occur on any level. Your final paper will require that your analytic, research, and writing skills all work together.

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**Writing,  
Formal and  
Otherwise**

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Writing, of course, is difficult. One writer, when asked to describe his writing process, explained that he simply puts a piece of paper into his typewriter, and then he stares at it until it starts to sweat blood.

I won't be asking for anything that extreme, but I will be asking you to participate in grammar exercises, in-class writing exercises, draft workshops, one-on-one conferences, and for you to write a total of three formal 5-page papers. These formal papers should all observe MLA conventions, which are detailed in your Prentice Hall text.

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**Required  
and  
Suggested  
Texts**

- ⊗ Harris, Muriel. *Prentice Hall Reference Guide to Grammar and Usage*. 5th edition. Prentice Hall, ISBN: 0-13-184790-2
- ⊗ *The Conscious Reader*. 9th edition. Finestone, Harry, Caroline Shrodes and Michael Shugrue, ed. Longman, ISBN: 0-321-16074-6

I also *strongly* recommend that you do all of your readings for this class with a big, thick dictionary at your side. Most of our texts are not particularly easy to read, and having to guess at the meaning of occasional words will only make your work more difficult.

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**Grade  
Breakdown**

Formal Writing: 65%

- ⊗ Essays #1 and #2: 20% each
- ⊗ Essay #3: 25%

Informal Writing: 15%

Participation: 10%

Grammar Exercises and Quizzes (if necessary): 10%

- ⊗ Quizzes will not necessarily be announced in advance

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**Writing  
Resources**

You will be required to participate in individual one-on-one conferences on your papers and to participate in writing workshops as well. Your papers' grades will depend in part upon this participation. I also encourage you to sign up for voluntary conferences with me. If you're willing to do the work, I want to help you.

If you receive a grade below a 'C-' on any of our formal papers, I may give you the chance to rewrite, *pending* your visit to one of CCAC's writing tutors. The writing center is located on the fifth floor of the library—right next door. This doesn't mean, however, that you need to wait for a bad grade to visit one of our tutors. These resources are here for you, so please don't hesitate to use them.

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English 101-AC03:  
*Course Policies*

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Class times: Tu/Th 9:00-11:00, Summer 2005

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- 1) **Attendance:** This class will form a community that will in part determine its own direction. While 10% of your grade will come directly from your participation in this community, a far greater percentage of your grade will depend *indirectly* upon how actively you choose to participate. For this reason, more than one absence from this class will affect your final grade, and you will not be able to pass this class if you accrue more than three absences.
- 2) **Tardiness:** If you arrive more than 5 minutes after class begins, you will be late for class. If you are late twice, this will count against you as an absence. The door to this classroom will close at 15 minutes past the hour. At that point, you will not just be counted late; you will be counted as absent – even if you do eventually turn up.
- 3) **Electronic Devices:** Cell phones, iPods, etc. must be turned off. Should it become clear to me that someone's electronic devices have not been turned off (as in, someone's phone rings), then that day will be treated as an absence for the person, and the above attendance policies will be enforced.
- 4) **Formal Requirements:** All class work should be written in blue or black ink, and all out of class work should be typed, double-spaced, with one-inch margins in a twelve-point font. Do not use courier font or any other larger typeface to take up more space. Where formal assignments are concerned, please use MLA standards.
- 5) **Save Your Work:** Please keep good records. Keep a copy of the paper you just turned in to me, and keep the graded copy around after I return it to you. If all goes well, we will never need your back-up copies, but, as the old saw goes, better safe than sorry.
- 6) **Extra Credit:** I will offer extra credit only to the entire class. If it's the week before the semester ends and you're suddenly unsatisfied with your own grade, don't even ask.
- 7) **In Case of Absence:** You are personally responsible for the content of each class period, whether you were present, absent for a good reason, or absent for no reason at all. This includes (but is not limited to) all assignments given or worked on, any schedule changes instituted, and any announcements announced. Therefore, it will be a good idea to exchange phone numbers or e-mail addresses with your fellow students.
- 8) **Late Policy:** No late work will be accepted.
- 9) **...And Should You Experience Any Technical Difficulties:** If you're having a hard time with this course—for whatever reason—please feel free to speak with me. Write me an e-mail, speak with me before or after class, surreptitiously pass me a note... whatever you like. As I see it, we're in this together, and I'm here to help.

## Essay # 1: Write Your Way Out

Inst. Joshua Schriftman  
English 101-AC03  
Tuesday/Thursday 9:00 A.M., Summer 2005

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<b>The Assignment</b>	<p>Write your way out of the identities that others have given you.</p> <p>To provide you with direction on this assignment, look to the works we've read and discussed in class. These works all contain commentary on how a person or culture can give an individual an identity, and some of these works also demonstrate how to fight against that assigned identity.</p>
<b>The Requirements</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) Complete the assignment above by considering any question or combination of the questions from "The Works," below.</li><li>2) Write at least four full pages and no more than six.</li><li>3) Quote from our readings at least two times. I think quoting from more than just one source would help you write and think, but that is not a requirement.</li><li>4) Mind all of the rules for formal writing listed in the syllabus, and practice MLA formatting. (Your works cited page will not count as one of your four-to-six pages.)</li></ol>
<b>The Works</b>	<p><b>"Letter to my Nephew":</b> Baldwin speaks frankly with his nephew and tells him that as an African-American he was meant to be "an immovable pillar" (Baldwin 161) upon which an ignorant white society could stand itself.</p> <p>Not necessarily in terms of black and white, but in terms of oppression, what personal insights have you had into Baldwin's nephew's situation? What do you personally know about being "meant" to be someone that you didn't necessarily want to be? Can you think of a time when, despite being surrounded by "innocents," you were also surrounded by a system of symbols "deliberately constructed to make you believe what [other] people say about you" (161)? Specifically, what were these symbols; how did they get there? How did you deal with this situation? What would Baldwin have offered?</p> <hr/> <p><b>"Shooting an Elephant":</b> In this essay, Orwell takes on not only an elephant, but also the strange animal of the oppressed oppressor. The power to form others' identities, it appears, is a power shared by all.</p> <p>Have you ever found yourself in this situation? Have you ever (as a parent, a teacher, in romantic or work relationship, etc.) "turned tyrant" and "destroyed your own freedom" (Orwell 177)? If so, in the context of your own experience, what did that mean to you? How did the <i>myth</i> of your identity as the oppressor come to you? What was that identity like? How could you have found your freedom again?</p>

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**“Decolonising the Mind”:** Thiong’o tells us that our language is a carrier and a creator of culture, and that “to control a people’s culture is to control their tools of self-definition” (Thiong’o, 168). He described how as children through this process he and his friends were taken “further and further from [them]selves, towards other selves” (167). He also explained that in most cases negative self-images caused by this colonization of the mind become internalized unless we can “pinpoint” and externalize their beginnings (see the final paragraph of his essay).

We’ve never been colonized as a country, but as individuals or as members of minority groups, one could easily make the argument that we have. Can you think of any *internalized* negative self-images that you currently harbor? Can you *externalize* these images and figure out from where they came?

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**“Daddy,” “Principles of Newspeak,” and “Casa”:** We haven’t discussed any of these pieces yet, but they will give you further insight into the mechanisms of oppression and the formation of our identities. “Casa” will look at the most everyday ways in which our identities are formed. “Daddy” will describe a familial oppression which can become internalized; “Principles of Newspeak” will delve into speculative fiction to present a nightmare vision of Thiong’o’s observations on language.

Any of these pieces and the attendant questions that they raise about freedom, oppression, and identity could also be used in your paper, as could any of the issues brought up by Borges’ short story. Remember that the main point of this paper is to write your way out of the identities that others have given you. So long as you are trying to do that, you can quote from or discuss any of these works.

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**The Dates**

- ⊗ Tuesday, May 31<sup>st</sup> – **Prospective Topic Due**
  - One paragraph explaining your topic, including the literature you will look at along the way.
- ⊗ Thursday, June 2<sup>nd</sup> – **Complete, Typed Draft Due**
  - We will workshop our drafts on this day, so if you don’t have a draft, you cannot attend class. Consider the draft an admission ticket to class.
- ⊗ Tuesday, June 7<sup>th</sup> – **Final Draft, Essay #1 Due**

## Essay #2: *Expanding Your Scope*

Inst. Joshua Schriftman  
English 101-AC03  
Tuesday/Thursday 9:00 A.M., Summer 2005

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### ***The Story So Far***

In your first essay, you wrote your way out from under the masks that others have ascribed to you; you wrote your way through your struggles to find an identity that is more your own. In order to do that, you needed to undertake a critical analysis of specific memories from your own life. You had to take apart and carefully consider the forces that met at a specific time in your life to produce a specific effect on you. Finally, you had to write your way out of that fix.

Now I want you to turn your attention outward.

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### ***The New Assignment***

Tear off the destructive masks from someone whose civil rights have been—or are being—violated.

When it serves those in power (those to whom the *status quo* is valuable), the mask placed upon an entire class of people can become a mythology, an epidemic of unwarranted identity, an exploitative and too easily believable lie.

In this portion of the course, we will start by looking at the concept of the floating Satan, or the scapegoat; we will go on to read the founding works written to create a world where our rights are ensured as “unalienable”; and we will also read what still others have written to maintain their own control, human rights be damned. Finally, we will watch *Boys Don’t Cry*, which contains the story of one individual whose identity became the motive for murders.

In *Slam*, Saul Williams fought against these destructive masks with his “tools of self-definition,” or his words, and *that* is what I want you to do now: Take up your arms (your words) and the battle for the identity of someone whose rights are at risk.

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### ***Before You Begin***

Before you can begin writing, this assignment is going to require you to do some research. Find a specific incidence of civil rights violations that you would like to investigate. Read up on this incident as much as you need to. This research will be a source of authority for you.

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**The  
Structure**

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Once you've found your topic, this exercise will require a three-pronged attack:

1) Providing an *appropriate* level of detail, **relate the incident** to your readers.

2) **Offer an analysis of the incident:** How were rights violated? Whose interests were served by the violation? Is there a history behind this kind of violation? What belief system (or mythology) allowed this violation to occur? Have you seen these beliefs enacted elsewhere? In short, convincingly explain to your reader *how* this violation could occur in America, where we have, as Jefferson wrote in our Declaration of Independence, "inalienable rights."

3) **Suggest a path of action** to annihilate the future of such violations. This could mean anything from proposing boycotts and demonstrations to suggesting that we take action more consistently against future violators. It *will* mean endorsing your own creative, positive plan of action ("creative resistance" as King called it in his letter) to help ensure that our inalienable rights are not forgotten again in the future.

**Note:** When undertaking step 3, **do not speak in general statements.** To avoid this pitfall, back up your suggested plan of action by consistently and rigorously relating it to the incident that you described and analyzed in the first two steps of this paper.

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**A note about  
voice**

Your first paper was about yourself; this one is about a problem in the rest of America. That should come through in your writing. Instead of just telling me about a problem, I want you to write with the world as your audience. Try to write your essay in the style of King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," as though it were for a newspaper audience whom you needed to convince. Remember all points on the Rhetorical Triangle.

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**Require-  
ments**

- This paper is to be 5–7 full pages.
- Quote from your sources at least twice, and integrate your quotes smoothly into your own paper.
- As stated in the syllabus, mind all the rules for formal writing, including the use of proper MLA format.
- Cite *all* your sources.

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**Dates**

**June 21<sup>st</sup>** : Prospectus and research sources due  
**June 23<sup>rd</sup>** : Rough Draft due for in-class workshop  
**June 28<sup>th</sup>** : **Final Paper Due**

## Essay #3: Deconstruction

Inst. Joshua Schriftman  
English 101-AC03  
Tuesday/Thursday 9:00 A.M., Summer 2005

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**Baldwin's  
Advice**

James Baldwin, in the course of helping his nephew to free himself from the constraints that a white culture had put up around him, told his nephew that “The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe” what the people in power say about you (161). This piece of advice—that it is dangerous to unquestioningly accept the messages imbedded in the details and symbols that our culture surrounds us with—is of great importance to us all.

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**Our  
Texts,  
Our  
Writings,  
Our Work**

When Orwell discussed a certain dangerous mythology of *self* that he had come to accept over time, he called it a “mask.” In our first paper, we looked at and tried to disassemble our own masks: our personal mythologies. When King wrote his letter from Birmingham jail, he instructed his readers to avoid “superficial analysis” and to look deeply into the social problems at hand. In our second paper, we analyzed the large-scale mythologies that have allowed civil rights violations to occur, and we tried to expose the truth behind the mythologies and to figure out a way to destroy or circumvent these dangerous mythologies.

Finally, when the authors in this section of the class looked at these “deliberately constructed” details and symbols first mentioned in our class by Baldwin, they discovered them imbedded in everything from our advertisements and our informal language to our television programs and the dreams we learned growing up. The real beast here is that we usually accept these cultural objects and practices almost unthinkingly – as though they were “natural” and “normal.” Never trust those words at first sight.

Later in this class we will do something called “trumping binaries,” which is one way to deconstruct a cultural mythology. We will also read examples of this kind of analysis – from David Byrne’s lambaste of “world music” and Jean Kirkpatrick’s scrutiny of marketing images to Dalton’s analysis of Horatio Alger and the American Dream.

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**Our Task**

Now, for your third paper, I would like you to undertake an analysis (a deep, critical analysis – a *reading-against-the-grain*) of an object, place, person, or practice from popular culture.

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**On  
Choosing  
an Object**

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Objects from mass media (T.V. shows, ads, advertising campaigns, media coverage of Jennifer and Brad’s big break-up, etc.) will work particularly well, but if you’d like to take a look at something from outside of mass media (storefront displays at the Waterfront, Pitt frat parties, or the Steelers’ tailgate parties, for example), that’d be fine as well.

An old professor of mine once said, “If you’re not angry, you’re just not paying attention.” So, start paying attention, and write about what you find. Choose any object or practice from our culture in which you find an offensive (or even just plain unexpected) layering of mythology hiding beneath its smooth surface. Choose a seemingly neutral object or practice that somehow works toward maintaining a malevolent or hurtful *status quo*. Choose an object that somehow helps our masks stay locked tightly in place.

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**A  
Suggested  
Structure**

I’ll recommend a structure here, but your structural decisions are really your own this time around.

Introduction & Summary: These paragraphs would let your readers know where your paper is headed; they would include a summary of the “nature” of the object you’ll be analyzing. No analysis would be necessary here, just a good *appropriately-detailed* description.

Deep Analysis: Read your object against the grain. Expose its mythologies, trump its false binaries, speak for its silent politics, and show the real cultural function of the institutions that created it: X-ray it for all to see. This is where good research could lend your paper authority and evidence.

Conclusion: Explain the implications of your work in a larger context. Push your analysis one step further. If you’ve revealed something reprehensible about, say, drum circles, what does that say about the college experience? Or, in another example, what might the violence of the post-game night out say about sports in America? Or about American entertainment in general? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, what could be done to address this?

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**The  
Require-  
ments**

- ☞ Research from texts not on the syllabus is required.
- ☞ Write at least five full pages, no more than seven (and your works cited page is required but not included in that page count).
- ☞ Mind all MLA and class rules for formal writing (see syllabus for details).
- ☞ Know that you’re responsible for the integrity of your Internet research.

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**The Dates**

- ☞ **Tuesday, July 12<sup>th</sup>** : Prospective Topics and Resources Due
  - ☞ **July 19<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup>** : One-on-One Conferences, Drafts due
  - ☞ **Thursday, July 28<sup>th</sup>** : **Final Drafts Due**
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## Trumping Binaries

One of the classic moves in our daily cultural logic is the binary: the pair of terms that between them judges, apprehends, and understands the world: Right and Wrong, Good and Bad, Perceptive and Dull, Western and Oriental, New and Old, Innovative and Imitative, Patriotic and Treasonous, North and South, Urban and Rural, Sophisticated and Naïve, Left and Right, Human and Animal, Animal and Plant, Life and Death, Spiritual and Material, Body and Mind. From Gilman's story, think of Sane and Insane. From "Daddy," think of Love and Hate.

The list goes on, the pattern remains: cut the world in half, then define which half gets in and which half doesn't, making it clear that the 'in' half is better than the other. The more you think about these binaries (pairs of terms), the more unfair they become. In fact, few things are one or the other; the definition of such labels is highly loaded; the obvious value judgments in a label often smuggle in less obvious cultural prejudices; the more ways you look at a thing, the better you understand it. Binaries come to seem more like a way of controlling others than a way of understanding things. Erase the binary, and you don't even have the continuum between its extremes: you have a multiple, polymorphous, multifarious reality instead. Erase the binary, and reality becomes an open mound of clay rather than prefabricated givens.

In card games, you "trump" somebody's card when you take the trick by stepping outside the suit that's been led and playing a card from a higher suit. Clever debaters "trump" an opponent by stepping outside the opponent's way of describing a situation, trashing its logical terms and producing a better way to think through an issue.

Your job is to take a pair of binary terms—it's good to choose a pair that irritate you, or alternately a pair that you deeply believe in—and then find the card with which you can trump them. Show how woefully inadequate they are—how badly they mislead someone trying to be smart about the situation you have in mind, how drastically they simplify its complexities and hide what's really important to think about, how insidiously they control us by pretending to reveal the whole truth and nothing but that truth and by reshaping the situation until it "proves" their own worldview. In other words, *erase the binary, and discover how rich reality really is when the terms that try to limit human experience are undone.*

[Based on one of the Rhizomatic Writing exercises of Professor Robert Siegle at Virginia Tech. –JS, 1/22/10]

# English 102: Working Literacy

Joshua Schriftman  
[jschriftman@ccac.edu](mailto:jschriftman@ccac.edu)  
Monday/Wednesday/Friday 8:00 A.M.  
Spring 2005

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**English 102:  
Working  
Literacy**

Welcome to English 102. This class will make three basic demands of you:

- 1) Do your assigned readings.
- 2) Actively participate in the class discussions involving these readings.
- 3) Complete the associated writing assignments and presentations.

These three demands will entail a certain amount of work and discipline on your behalf, and I'll detail that below. First, though, I'd like to explain what I mean by "Working Literacy."

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**Working  
Literacy,  
Reading  
Directions**

In this course we'll be reading, discussing, and writing about poetry and fiction. In order to understand the texts we'll be looking at, we'll need to understand how they work. That will mean discussing their context, their authors, their structures, and the different ways in which they convey their meaning.

This is no different than the process you go through on your own when trying to understand any text. If, for instance, you don't know how to read a set of instructions, then:

L. at corner  
straight 3 blocks  
#4569 on right

...would be pretty meaningless to you. If you knew what those lines meant, though—that "L." means *go left*; that "4569" is a house number—then you could find that house three blocks over, and you could find out what was living inside. Knowledge and experience would serve you well.

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**Working  
Literacy,  
Reading  
Literature**

Similarly, if you're not used to reading literature, then the lines:

Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye  
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies  
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?  
On what wings dare he aspire?  
What the hand dare seize the fire?

---

*Reading  
Literature*

---

And what shoulder, & what art  
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?  
And when thy heart began to beat,  
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain?  
In what furnace was thy brain?  
What the anvil? what dread grasp  
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears,  
And watered heaven with their tears,  
Did he smile his work to see?  
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye  
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

...could prove difficult. Once again, though, if you had some useful interpretive techniques on your side, then you might be able to find your way around this poem and see what it holds inside.

For instance, this poem is by William Blake, and it was written in 1794. What was the world like in 1794? Go further: Blake's work often touches on an image of God/creator as blacksmith. Go from there to Blake's own affinity for Gnosticism, an esoteric kind of Christianity, then to the references to biblical passages in the poem, and then even to the body of critical work written on this poem and Blake's other poems. The possibilities become staggering: the "meaning" living inside these words takes a backseat to the meanings—the possibilities you discover, and their depth and complexity. All you need to do to get there is to know how to read it, and to know how to research.

And that, in a nutshell, is what I hope you will get out of this course: How to interpret a text on your own, without the help of this class to get you there.

In order to get you going down this road toward a "working literacy," you'll have to tackle some assignments in this class. These essays and presentations will not only challenge and strengthen your ability to deal with texts, but they will also test your ability to write. Through this work and the comments you'll receive on your work, you will not only begin to understand more about interpreting texts, but you will also become better writers.

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<b>Texts</b>	Charters, Ann and Samuel, eds. <i>Literature And Its Writers</i> . New York: Bedford/St. Martin, 2004. [See p. 1666 for any MLA formatting questions.]
	Naylor, Gloria. <i>Mama Day</i> . New York: Vintage, 1989.
	Those two are required, and I also <i>strongly</i> recommend that you do all of your readings for this class with a big, thick dictionary at your side. Most of our texts are not easy to read, and having to guess at the meaning of occasional words will only make your work more difficult.
<b>Grade Breakdown</b>	Formal Writing/Presentations: 60% — Three major assignments : 15% for the first two, and 30% for the last Informal Writing: 20% Participation: 10% Grammar Exercises and Quizzes (if necessary): 10% — Quizzes will not necessarily be announced in advance
<b>Conferences</b>	You may be required to participate in individual one-on-one conferences on your papers and to participate in writing workshops as well. Your papers' grades will depend in part upon this participation. I also encourage you to sign up for voluntary conferences with me. If you're willing to do the work, I want to help you. That said, however, when you do consult with me about a draft you're working on, I will not comment on every flaw. Seeing me for a conference, even multiple conferences, and revising your projects according to my recommendations, even multiple times, does not guarantee that you will receive a high grade on that project.
<b>Additional Resources</b>	If you receive a grade below a 'C-' on any of our formal papers, I may give you the chance to rewrite, pending your visit to one of CCAC's writing tutors. This doesn't mean, however, that you need to wait for a bad grade to visit one of our tutors. These resources are here for you, so please don't hesitate to use them.

[**Note:** I also handed out course policies with this syllabus, but they were almost identical to the policies already included above on page four. –JS 1/18/10]

# Paper #1: *Background Check*

Inst. Joshua Schriftman  
English 102-AC14  
Monday/Wednesday/Friday 8:00 A.M.  
Spring 2005

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**The Texts** We started with the jazzed up poetry of Langston Hughes, we moved on to “Battle Royal,” an excerpt from Ralph Ellison’s novel, *The Invisible Man*, and then we read Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper.” We will soon be looking at poetry from Sylvia Plath, Wilfred Owens, and Stephen Crane, and we will also be looking at more prose from Sherman Alexie and Hemingway.

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**The Assignment** Research one aspect of any one of these texts, and then write a 4-6 page paper explaining how your research could shed some light on the text.

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**Step 1: Research** Once you’ve chosen the piece about which you’d like to write, start out by doing some general research. Find out about the era in which the text was written, the themes it touched on, the life of the author, and the general context out of which the text arose. This kind of research could be done online or at the library, and I’ve also tried to get you started on this in our daily class discussions.

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**Step 2: Narrow Your Focus** Once you’re familiar with some of the history surrounding the work, then it’s time for you to narrow your focus: choose one aspect of the research you’ve done, and concentrate on that one aspect. For instance, if you were going to write on Langston Hughes’ poetry, perhaps you would become interested in his education at Colombia. Start looking into the history of Colombia at the time when Hughes was there. Was it fully integrated? What were the demographics like? What kinds of classes were offered? If you were going to consider “The Yellow Wallpaper,” perhaps you might find it interesting to study the history of “hysteria,” or the state of Victorian medicine.

As your focused research progresses, keep in mind the work that you’re studying. At what points do you find interesting resonances and illuminating details? Pursue these details.

**Concentrate on primary research sources** Try not to resort to existing critical studies of your text, as they will attempt to tell you what to think. It will be more interesting and illuminating for you to figure it out on your own.

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**Step 3:  
Share Your  
Knowledge**

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You may not discover any profound new meanings in our texts, but as you do your research and re-read the text about which you're writing, you will no doubt form some distinct ideas of your own: So now it's time to share. Put your thoughts together, and present them in a medium length essay.

*Note:  
Always,  
always  
support your  
claims with  
textual  
evidence*

Don't think of this part as "forming a thesis," as much as "articulating your ideas." Simply introduce your topic to your readers, introduce your research, and demonstrate its significance. A strong conclusion to your paper might even attempt to push things a bit, to take your solid evidence and use it to pose an interesting idea for further exploration.

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**The Details**

- ☞ Write at least four **full** pages, no more than six (works cited not included).
- ☞ Mind all MLA and class rules for formal writing. This includes always citing quotations and facts—from our own anthology or from anywhere else. Additionally, if you're pulling an idea from someone else's article, give them credit. To do otherwise is plagiarism.
- ☞ Know that you are responsible for the integrity of your Internet research.

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**The Dates**

- ☞ **Monday, January 31<sup>st</sup>** : Library trip—know what text you want to write about, and try to have a direction in mind for your research.
- ☞ **Friday, February 4<sup>th</sup>** : Peer Revision—Bring full, typed draft. This draft will be an entrance ticket to class. No draft, no admittance.
- ☞ **Wednesday, February 9<sup>th</sup>** : **Final Draft Due.**

## “Paper” #2: *In Theory*....

Inst. Joshua Schriftman  
English 102-AC14  
Monday/Wednesday/Friday 8:00 A.M.  
Spring 2005

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<b><i>The Story So Far</i></b>	In your first paper, you chose and researched some aspect of one of the texts we read, and then you shared in writing the ways in which that research illuminated the text at hand. Those research skills will still be important for our second project, but now we will introduce a second element: interpretive technique (also known as literary theory, or schools of critical thought).
<b><i>The Assignment</i></b>	With your group (which will be determined over the course of the next ten days), you will prepare a ten-minute <b>presentation</b> and a <b>handout</b> on one of the <b>four literary theories</b> we will be discussing.
<b><i>Four Literary Theories, And the Groups That Study Them</i></b>	Over the next few days, we will be learning about four different schools of critical thought: <i>Structuralism</i> , <i>Psychoanalysis</i> , <i>Feminism</i> , and <i>Marxism</i> . As we read about these schools of critical thought, I would like you to sign up with me—in person or via e-mail to <a href="mailto:jschriftman@ccac.edu">jschriftman@ccac.edu</a> —to work with the school that interests you most. After four people have signed up for a given literary theory, I will close that group off. Please feel free to look ahead in your packet if you would like to make your decision sooner rather than later. I will require that by Wednesday, March 9 <sup>th</sup> , you have chosen your school of critical thought.
<b><i>The Presentation</i></b>	Your group will give the rest of the class a 10-minute presentation on the style of literary criticism that you’ve chosen. Your presentation should include: <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) An explanation of the thought and theory typical of the school of criticism, and a summary of the history of this kind of criticism; and</li><li>2) An analysis of any one of the works we’ve read since we turned in our first paper. This analysis should exemplify the style of your chosen school.</li></ol>
<b><i>The Handout</i></b>	Your group will also distribute a handout during your presentation. This handout should include a written copy of the analysis you’ve delivered verbally to the class (one to two pages), further historical and explanatory background on the school of thought you’ve chosen to study (one to two pages), and an annotated bibliography including all of the useful texts that you’ve found (one to two pages). Additionally, a works cited list should also be attached; MLA format will be required as usual.

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***Explanatory  
and  
Historical  
Section***

For this part of your presentation and handout, you should research some of the primary texts involved with the school of critical thought that you've chosen. To identify these sources, follow some of the leads given in the "selected readings" sections of your theory packet.

---

***Analysis  
Section***

Your analysis will be primarily creative, and should follow the same rules of logic that we've discussed before – specific claims, solid evidence, and valid backing. However, keeping the Rhetorical Triangle in mind, *authority* is also important. So, once you've gotten some ideas of your own together, take a look at the existing critical literature and see who else out there will be able to back you up.

If you find anyone who disagrees, maybe you want to mention them, too—to explain why they're wrong. This kind of in-fighting within schools of critical thought is not only a time-honored tradition, but it's good fun and keeps us all honest.

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***Annotated  
Bibliography***

The annotated bibliography will simply list all of the worthwhile works you have come across while compiling your presentation. Unlike a works cited list, this list can and should include works that you did not cite in your handout or presentation. Think of it as a way to help your classmates help themselves to more information after this class is over.

The annotation part is fairly simple: After each entry in the bibliography, simply skip a space and provide a short, two or three sentence explanation of the purpose and usefulness of the work.

---

***One Final  
Requirement***

On the day that the ten-minute presentations are due to be given, I will ask you to also turn in a brief paragraph covering: 1) your own contributions to the group project, and 2) your view of how your group worked together. If you have nothing to say about how your group worked together, then simply stating what your own contributions were will do fine.

---

***The Dates***

- ☞ **Wednesday, March 9<sup>th</sup>** : Groups assignments are completed.
- ☞ **March 11<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup>** : Classes **meet in library** for group research.
- ☞ **Friday, March 18<sup>th</sup>** : Return to classroom; draft of handout due
- ☞ **Monday, March 28<sup>th</sup>** : **Presentations and final drafts due**

## Paper #3: “Really listen....”

Inst. Joshua Schriftman  
English 102-AC14  
Monday/Wednesday/Friday 8:00 A.M.  
Spring 2005

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### ***The Story So Far***

We started this class with Langston Hughes, Earnest Hemmingway, Ralph Ellison, Charlotte Gilman, Sylvia Plath, and a few others. We did background research on these authors and their themes, and we wrote about what kind of light this research shed on our texts. For the second part of this class, we read a number of short but more difficult texts from the likes of Marquéz, Poe, Kafka, and Eliot. Your corresponding project required you to research the *way* we can understand difficult texts such as these. We studied psychoanalytic, structuralist, Marxist, and feminist literary theory; we worked collaboratively to apply these theories to our reading; and we shared our research with the class.

---

### ***The New Assignment***

Now I want you to combine these two skills, research and interpretation. For our final assignment, I want you to apply these skills to a longer work: *Mama Day*. You will decide first on a theme, and then you will choose a school of literary theory through which to approach that theme.

---

### ***A Few Words on Theme***

In our presentations and talks in class, we have discussed (or soon will discuss) a number of different themes. Among them are:

- ⊗ Magic
- ⊗ Colonization
- ⊗ American and African-American History
- ⊗ Cultural Identity
- ⊗ Roles of Women/Roles of Men/Gender Identity
- ⊗ Community
- ⊗ Home
- ⊗ Family
- ⊗ History/The Past
- ⊗ Tradition vs. Modernity
- ⊗ Storytelling (remember Scheherazade?)
- ⊗ The Literary Canon
- ⊗ The Use of Myth

There are, needless to say, many other themes involved in the novel, and you are not restricted to those listed above. Either way, your first step in this assignment should be to choose a theme you find interesting.

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***A Few  
Words on  
Theory***

*Note: While you may use the same school of theory you discussed for your group project, you are not required to do so.*

- 1) Your literary theory of choice should not be the point of this paper, as it was for our previous project. Theory in this paper should be more of a general approach, secondary to the theme you'd like to research and discuss—but definitely present. You might think of theme as raw material and theory as a given set of tools. Which theoretical framework will best suit your raw material? With what set of ideas will you be able to make the most of your theme?
- 2) You should not feel hemmed in by your theoretical framework. As an example of what I mean here, consider a paper about Kafka's "Metamorphosis": Let's say you took a psychoanalytic approach, and you wanted to discuss Gregor's relationship with his mother. You might notice that instead of getting closer to his mother, Gregor moves farther away while his father becomes closer; this is a reversal of the way we usually think of the Oedipal complex. This wouldn't mean you couldn't use a psychoanalytic approach, it just means that you were doing something interesting and different with that approach. In other words, don't give up if your theme doesn't fit into your theoretical framework with cookie-cutter ease; that might just mean that you're onto something good.
- 3) While I am asking you to choose from one of the four literary approaches we discussed in class, if you would like to mix them up a bit—for instance, take a feminist psychoanalytic approach to the social construction of Sapphira Day (or some such thing)—that would be totally acceptable. In fact, that's a much more realistic way of using theory. Just please remember to express your ideas clearly; understanding it yourself is only half the battle.

---

***A Few  
Words on  
Research:  
Developing  
Your Ideas***

Once you have a theme and a theoretical approach chosen, your next step is to develop your ideas. This is where research (either theoretical, theme-related, or both) will become necessary. Develop questions about your topic, and then try to search out the answers. This outside research won't exactly be required, but if your project needs it, and you don't do it, your paper will be weaker for your neglect.

---

***To Thesis or  
Not to  
Thesis...?***

Your thesis paragraph should summarize what you want to say about your text, but feel free to save this part for later. Start with your research, and then before you begin to write, try to figure out what kind of thesis you could support. You may find after you start writing that you actually have a different thesis than the one you thought you started with. That's fine. Go back and change it. Flexibility is a gift. Just make sure that in the end your thesis is sound and well supported.

---

***The  
Require-  
ments***

- 
- ☞ Write at least five full pages, no more than seven (works cited not included).
  - ☞ Mind all MLA and class rules for formal writing (see syllabus for details).
  - ☞ Know that you're responsible for the integrity of your Internet research.

***The Dates***

- 
- ☞ **Friday, April 22<sup>nd</sup>** : Prospective Topics: One paragraph on your chosen theme and school of theory.
  - ☞ **Wednesday, April 27<sup>th</sup>** : Peer Revision / Presentations
  - ☞ **Monday, May 2<sup>nd</sup>** : **Final Draft**

Grading Criteria:

Total Grade: \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_

<p>➤ <b><u>Cultivated Exploration (30 pts)</u></b>          Topic is significant; not too simplistic or easy: _____          Paper is focused; there is little or no extraneous information: _____          Topic corresponds to assignment: _____</p>	<p><b><u>Comments:</u></b></p>
<p>➤ <b><u>Intellectual Tenacity (30)</u></b>          Major claims are carefully analyzed: _____          Claims are specific: _____          Evidence is used to support claims: _____</p>	
<p>➤ <b><u>Structure and Presentation (30)</u></b>          Anticipation of readers' response; Strategic presentation: _____          Paragraphing: _____          Quotations and evidence introduced, explained well: _____</p>	
<p>➤ <b><u>Complete Draft (10 pts)</u></b>          _____</p>	
<p>➤ <b><u>Grammar/Mechanics (limiting factors, possible deductions)</u></b>          Assignment directions ignored: - _____          Professional format (MLA, etc.): - _____          Grammar &amp; Spelling: - _____          Word choice &amp; clarity: - _____</p>	
<p>➤ <b><u>Style</u></b>          Possible additions: + _____</p>	

➤ **Additional Comments:**

# Travel Writing from the Margins

Spring 2008, Wednesdays 1:00 – 4:00

## Instructor: Joshua Schriftman

E-mail: [joshua.schriftman@gmail.com](mailto:joshua.schriftman@gmail.com)

Phone: 412-657-6266 (e-mail is ideal)

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<b>Course Description</b>	<p>Students in this class will familiarize themselves with travel writing in general, and travel writing from marginalized groups in particular. Through readings, writing, discussion, guest speakers, and the research of their fellow students, students in this class will end up with a valuable perspective on how travel writing interacts with the writer's—and the reader's—place in the world.</p> <p>We will: situate travel writing within its larger genre of creative nonfiction; study travel narratives from minority groups within America as they travel without; read and discuss accounts of returning to one's "motherland"; and look at non-American travel perspectives on America. Optional writing assignments will be discussed and workshopped in class, and a capstone presentation will be shared with the class on the final day.</p>
<b>Required Text</b>	<p>There is only one required text, and it should be available at the Book Center. It is Professor Faith Adiele's <i>Meeting Faith: The Forest Journals of a Black Buddhist Nun</i>. All other readings will be distributed in class.</p>
<b>Course Requirements</b>	<p>You will be expected to come to class regularly and on time, and to complete all readings and writing exercises on time. Due to the fast pacing of the course, I must strongly discourage late work.</p> <p>You will be expected to contribute constructively to discussions in class. As I'm sure you know, "constructive" does not mean dominating conversations or reiterating something that you've already said. It does mean thoughtful, relevant contributions based on assigned readings and assignments, and/or relevant outside readings or experiences.</p> <p>You will also be expected to participate as a member of this class by doing the necessary research and preparation to give an informative and thought-provoking presentation or paper.</p>
<b>Calendar</b>	<p>The calendar below is designed to give you an idea of where I see this course going right now. But, that said, we haven't met yet. If the readings, or anything else, seem to be too much—or too little—we will adjust.</p>

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*Day 1:  
Intro to  
Travel  
Writing*

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**Readings Due**

- Scott Anderson, “As Long as We Were Together, Nothing Bad Could Happen to Us”
- Amitav Ghosh, “The Imam and the Indian”
- Ian Jacks, introduction to the *Granta* travel reader

**In-Class Readings and Activities**

- *Brevity* Shorts
- Describing Home

**Readings for Next Week**

Introduction to Faith Adiele’s *Meeting Faith: The Forest Journals of a Black Buddhist Nun*; James Baldwin, “Equal in Paris”

**Assignments for Next Week**

Keeping in mind some of the elements of travel writing that we’ve discussed, write a two to three page piece of travel literature about your home from the perspective of a traveler from another country. Remember: your traveler has never been to the place you’re describing before.

Choose a topic for your presentation and begin your research.

---

*Day 2:  
Stranger in a  
Strange Land,  
pt. 1*

**Readings Due**

- James Baldwin, “Equal in Paris”
- Introduction to Adiele’s *Meeting Faith*

**In-Class Readings and Activities**

- Excerpt of Wexler’s essay on post-modern nonfiction
- Free write on our readings thus far
- Topics workshop

**Reading for Next Week**

Read at least first two chapters of Professor Adiele’s book.

**Assignments for Next Week**

Prepare a few questions for Professor Adiele’s visit, and continue to do research for your presentation.

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**Day 3:**  
***Stranger in a  
Strange Land,  
pt. 2***

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**Readings Due**

At least two chapters of *Meeting Faith*

**In-Class Readings and Activities**

- Faith Adiele visits us today. Please have questions prepared for her.
- Free write on and discussion of progress in your research

**Readings for Next Week**

- Excerpt from Andrew Lam's *Perfume Dreams*
- Edward Said, "Paradise Lost"
- Salmon Rushdie, "A Dream of Glorious Return"

**Assignment for Next Week**

Please bring an outline or rough draft of the five to seven minute presentation you'd like to give the following week.

---

**Day 4:**  
***Narratives of  
Return; From  
a Different  
Point of View***

**Readings Due**

- Excerpt from Andrew Lam's *Perfume Dreams*
- Edward Said, "Paradise Lost"
- Salmon Rushdie, "A Dream of Glorious Return"

**In-Class Readings and Activities**

- Excerpt from Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*
- Workshop presentation

**Readings for Next Week**

- Bill Bryson, "Fat Girls in Des Moines"
- Umberto Eco, "Travels in Hyperreality"

**Assignments for Next Week**

Prepare final presentations and papers

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**Day Five:**  
***From a  
Different  
Point of View***

**Readings Due**

- Umberto Eco, "Travels in Hyperreality"
- Bill Bryson, "Fat Girls in Des Moines"

**In-Class Readings and Activities**

Student presentations and papers delivered

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## *Presentation Guidelines*

With each new armload of books I removed from Hillman Library as I prepared to teach this course, it slowly dawned upon me that I would never be able to create a survey of all of the important writings that a course such as this one should cover. Without more time—or the ability to read 400 pages per week—there is no way we could cover a decent amount of the work that falls under the rubric of “Travel Writing from the Margins.” For that reason, I’m enlisting you all to help each other learn.

Each of your presentations will be a five to seven minute talk delivered on the last day of class, March 6. It will introduce the class to any topic related to this course. I have provided below a number of possible areas of research to help you find a topic, should you need the help. The ideal topic is neither too broad (e.g., Women travel writers) nor so narrow that you won’t have enough to say (e.g., Edith Wharton’s first trip to Turkey).

Your presentation can simply be a lecture, but I’ve found that handouts or visual aids can really enhance learning for most people. So, while you are not required to produce written material to accompany your talk, I would recommend some sort of additional material to support you. If you need any kind of A/V devices, let me know at least one week in advance and I’ll see what I can do.

Finally, as interesting as your topics are, sometimes holding forth can become boring. Please do what you can to keep your presentations fresh and engaging. Encourage audience participation. Be well enough prepared so that you’re not simply reading a paper out loud. **Make your presentation memorable.**

### Important Dates

- February 14** : In-class topic workshop
- February 21** : Research should be underway
- February 28** : In-class presentation outline workshop
- March 6** : **Deliver presentation**

### Possible Areas of Research

- V.S. Naipaul, his Indian trilogy of travelogues (which includes *An Area of Darkness*, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, and *A Million Mutinies Now*), or any one of those books.
- Eddy Harris, particularly *Native Stranger*
- Other travel narratives by African Americans, or particularly those in Africa (consider specifying a single location, such as Ghana, or a single era, such as the 1960s).
- You could also consider African-American travel writing in Paris, or another specific location, such as Russia.
- Gay and Lesbian travel literature
- Travel writing by women (with so many to choose from, you would want to specify a particular writer, such as Edith Wharton, Freya Stark, Emily Carr, or someone more contemporary, such as Annie Dillard or Joan Didion)
- Travel writing by Native Americans in America (*Blue Highways* comes to mind)

This list is intended to give you an idea of the kind of areas that would be good to consider. If you'd like to choose something directly off the list, go right ahead, but please do not feel limited by the list. Basically, if there's something you think this class should have covered but didn't, that might be the perfect topic for you.

## Writing the Travel Essay

Fall 2008, Thursday 1:00 – 4:00

**Instructor: Joshua Schriftman**

E-mail: [joshua.schriftman@gmail.com](mailto:joshua.schriftman@gmail.com)

Phone: 412-657-6266 (e-mail is ideal)

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***Course***

***Description***

Writing is a craft, and this course will help you sharpen your skills at that craft. Short readings will stimulate conversations on the structures, techniques, and possibilities of creative nonfiction in general and travel writing in particular. In-class writing exercises will also help improve your writing techniques.

The one major writing assignment in this course is designed to produce a polished, well-structured travel essay. This essay will, in the course of its production, be drafted, workshopped in class, critiqued by me (your faithful instructor), and rewritten. Finally, with what will surely be a masterpiece in hand, you will have a chance to read an excerpt of your work to your classmates, and we will all have a chance to hear what everyone else is writing.

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***Required Text***

There are no required texts, although you may want to procure a copy of *The Woman Warrior*, since the author, Maxine Hong Kingston, will be visiting our campus on the 29<sup>th</sup> of September. This purchase is not required, though, and I will provide you with photocopies of all our readings.

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***Calendar***

The calendar on the following page is designed to give you an idea of where I see this course going right now. That said, we haven't even met yet. If the readings (or anything else) seem to be going in the wrong direction, we will adjust as we go.

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## Class Calendar

*Day 1,  
Sept. 11*

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**Readings:**

- Iyer, "Why We Travel"
- Wexler, "Saying goodbye to once upon a time or implementing postmodernism in creative nonfiction"

**Activities:**

- Osher business
- Introductions
- Brief in-class writing exercise.

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*Day 2,  
Sept. 18*

**Readings:**

- Iyer, "Tibet," *Video Night in Kathmandu*

**Activities:**

- Discussion of structure and research in creative nonfiction
- In-class writing

**Due:** Essay Topic

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*Day 3,  
Sept. 25*

**Readings:**

Kingston, *The Warrior Woman*, specific chapter(s) to be announced.

**Activities:** Draft Workshop

**Due:** Draft

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*Day 4,  
Oct. 2*

**Readings:**

- Theroux, *Dark Star Safari*, "The Mother of the World"
- Wainaina, "How to Write about Africa"
- Seierstad, *The Bookseller of Kabul*, "The Call from Ali"

**Activities:** You will receive your critiqued drafts.

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*Day 5,  
Oct. 16*

**Possible Readings:**

Humor and/or Culinary travel, featuring Bill Bryson, Douglas Adams, Anthony Bourdain, and Hunter S. Thompson; or student favorites

**Activities:** Discussion of texts and student readings

**Due:** Final essay

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***The Essay***

Pico Iyer wrote that “We travel, initially, to lose ourselves; and we travel, next, to find ourselves.” So maybe for you this will be an essay about self-discovery, or maybe it will just be a story about getting lost. He also wrote that travel is about falling in love, so maybe you will want to tell a love story. Travel is, of course, many things to many people. Sometimes it’s international, and sometimes it happens three counties over; sometimes it’s inspiring, and sometimes it’s frightening; sometimes it’s personal and funny, and sometimes it’s political and very serious.

You are the author of this essay, so you will decide on the direction in which you want to take your essay. It is my job to help you do as good a job of that as you can. To this end, we will discuss not only what we think makes for good travel writing, but also certain structural and technical elements of essay writing in general. We will also workshop your writing half-way through the course, and you will have a chance to share your work with the rest of the class at the end of the course—by which time you will have produced an interesting, polished, well thought out, and well written travel essay.

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***The Dates***

- |                           |  |
|---------------------------|--|
| <b>September 11, 2008</b> | Receive this assignment  |
| <b>September 18, 2008</b> | Bring in proposed essay topics   |
| <b>September 25, 2008</b> | Workshop and hand in a first draft of your essay   |
| <b>October 2, 2008</b>    | Receive comments from me on your drafts  |
| <b>October 16, 2008</b>   | Turn in a final draft of your paper and an give (optional) five-minute readings from your work |
| <b>October 30, 2008</b>   | Receive e-mailed comments on your essay.   |

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***The Details***

- |               |  |
|---------------|--|
| <b>Length</b> | 10–20 pages. Here’s my reasoning for placing this limit on your writing: I think you will find it difficult to get across a substantial story in fewer than 10 pages, and I think your readers (i.e., your classmates and I) will find it difficult to give you helpful feedback on more material than 20 pages. |
| <b>Format</b> | Insofar as it is possible, please type and double-space all work, using at least 1-inch margins and a 12-point font, and number your pages (the above page limits are with this formatting in mind).   |

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***The Topic***

For next week, I'd like you to bring in a paragraph or so (a few sentences would be fine, but no more than 250 words, please) on what story you'd like to tell in your travel essay. There is no topic more or less appropriate for this essay, but there is an ideal level of specificity you may want to keep in mind. If you spent a year in China, for instance, you might want to talk about your one-week trip up the Yangtze rather than trying to encapsulate the entire year in one essay. Similarly, if you took your RV around the country last summer, you might find it difficult to hold forth on a single campsite for 10 pages or more—but then maybe this depends on the campsite! If you cannot decide on a single topic, bring multiple ideas in and ask us what we think.

Also, please bear in mind that your topic need not be specifically centered on geography. Perhaps instead you would like to write a travel essay tracing a certain food in your life—places you've enjoyed the local cheese, for instance. Feel free to think about this as creatively as you like. The best travel essays are the ones that surprise.