Writing Nonfiction on Social Change
WRTNG-UG 1303
Gallatin School, NYU
Spring 2017
1 Wash Pl, Room 527
Th 03:30 PM-6:10 PM

Prof. Nancy Agabian
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Course Description:
In this course, we'll examine nonfiction from times of conflict and crisis to help us write essays and critiques in which we witness, report, advocate, question, and/or desire change in our own era. To provide inspiration, we'll read essays on 9/11 and its aftermath, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and other issues. We'll read authors such as Michelle Alexander, Ta-Nehesi Coates, Edwidge Danticat, Joan Didion, Carolyn Forche, Roxane Gay, and Joshua Phillips, to study their use of formal tools such as narration, observation, analysis, reflection, and argument in exploring avenues of change in the world around them. How do writers bring a personal voice to writing a political essay? And how do reporters balance opinion and research to show the need for change? These questions are considered as you write 1) an essay centered on an issue that you care about, and 2) a report that you write from observation about a social or political movement. Finally, writing an argument or advocacy piece on a public debate allows you to incorporate many of the lessons from the semester. Revision is part of our process, guided by peer reviews.

Objectives:
- To become more adept as a critical reader of literary works of nonfiction, especially in identifying the success of an author to present information subjectively and objectively.
- To experiment with craft techniques of creative nonfiction in an effort to challenge yourself and to improve as a writer.
- To research topics through interview, reporting, the internet, the library and other means to effectively inform your writing.

Course Materials:
- A standard notebook (8 1/2 x 11” pages) to write in during class sessions and/or a laptop
- A folder to keep all class handouts, exercises, drafts and graded assignments
- A recording device of your choice: digital recorder, mp3 player, your computer program, or a recording app on your phone.

Required books: Available at the NYU bookstore:
None of Us Were Like This Before by Joshua Phillips. Verso, 2012. ISBN: 978-1844678846

Note: The rest of our course readings will be excerpts, posted on our NYU Classes site.
Major Assignments:

- Personal Essay: 6-7 pages
- Reportage: 6-7 pages
- Argument/Advocacy: 6-7 pages

More information about the major assignments will be given closer to when they are due. Before you turn in an assignment for a final grade, a draft of it will be workshopped in class. You will then revise it based on the comments you receive; turn in your first draft (with a report on your process) and the revised draft by the following session for a grade. Assignments that have not been workshopped will be deducted by one letter grade (e.g. a B assignment will receive a C). Late assignments will also be penalized, whether first or revised drafts, by 1/3 a letter grade for each day late. I won't accept an assignment more than a week late from the final due date.

Revision: Assignments may be revised after you receive a grade, and are usually due a week later. I will average together the first grade and the grade after revision. I highly encourage revision and take it into account when I give you a final course grade.

Page length: In order to not limit creativity, your writing can go under or over the suggested limit by a page or two. You should produce at least 20 new pages of workshopped and revised writing during the semester. You can link assignments thematically to create one long exploration into a subject or community, or you can treat them as separate, stand alone pieces on different topics.

Supplemental assignments:

Ten Reader Responses: one to two pages (300-600 words), posted online
Write a response to every set of readings, in answer to questions that I pose on NYU Classes under our Discussion Forum. Post these anytime during the week, until the deadline of one hour before our class meeting in order to receive credit. I will read these before our class so that I can get an idea of your thoughts on the readings and direct our discussion. They'll help you to work through your ideas about the content of the readings and the elements of writing and to engage in our class discussion. Print them out and bring to class for your notes if you don't carry a laptop or tablet to class.

Six Writing Exercises: one to two pages (300-600 words), hand-written or typed double-spaced
On the weeks when you don't have drafts of writing assignments or research exercises due, you will turn in a passage of experimental writing. Develop these pages on your own, or derive them from the writing exercises in class, but choose what to turn in based on what will help you develop the major assignments. I will read them and comment briefly to advise you on what/how to develop. I've listed extra writing prompts in the syllabus if you're not sure what to write.

Two Research Exercises: (300-600 words), typed double-spaced
You'll need to do research for your assignments and these exercises will give you guidelines, structure, and opportunities for advice and feedback from the class. The first will be for your Reportage piece – either an interview or a visit to a protest, community meeting, or other gathering, and the second will involve scholarly research to inform your Argument/Advocacy piece. You will turn in a brief, one-page report on each. I'll hand out guidelines for each one, and I will ask you to report your findings in class.
Supplemental assignments will help you develop your writing for the major assignments. They won't be graded: Responses and Exercises will get one point of credit, and Research Assignments will be assigned four points. The more you do, the better grade you will receive. I won't accept these supplemental assignments more than a week late.

**Participation:** Contributions to class discussions, comments during peer workshops, and reading aloud of writing are very important to this course. First of all, I'm really curious to learn what you're thinking. Speaking in class makes you a more active learner and stimulates your free writing, and and your discoveries and questions help other students with their interviews, research and writing. Your discussion also helps me understand your progress through the material, so that I can shape the course to your benefit. Verbal feedback during workshop sessions helps you to become a better editor of your own writing.

**Attendance:** You are expected to attend every class. Missing more than two classes will affect your grade, as will habitual lateness. Arriving late or leaving early for more than ten minutes, on two occasions, will count as an absence. If you miss more than four classes, you'll fail the course. There are exceptions for illness and family emergencies, so please inform me of any circumstances that prevent you from coming to class. If you can, let me know ahead of time if you know you will be late or absent.

**Etiquette:** Turn off noisy electronic devices before you arrive to class and put them away so as not to get distracted from the real human beings interacting directly with you. You can use a laptop or tablet during class to read texts, write, take notes, or look up information, but don't let your attention stray outside our frame of discussion and from our common tasks.

**Academic Integrity Policy:** As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website: [www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html](http://www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html).

**Incomplete policy:** A grade of Incomplete will be granted in this course only if you have already completed the vast majority of the work for the semester. If you find yourself at the end of the semester unable to finish the work for this course because of unexpected and unforeseeable circumstances, such as health problems or a family emergency, you must fill out a form called Request for a Grade of Incomplete and bring it to me by our last class meeting.

**Final Grade Breakdown:**
- Personal Essay: 25%
- Reportage: 25%
- Argument/Advocacy: 25%
- Writing Exercises, Research Exercises and Reading Responses: 15%
- Participation: 10%
Schedule: Subject to change with our progress as a class. Please contact me if you're absent or miss part of a class session to find out what you missed and to confirm assignments. In-class activities planned for each date are listed. Homework (HW) is listed under the date it is due. The questions for Reader Responses will be posted on the Discussion Forum on NYU Classes.

PERSONAL EXPRESSIONS OF IDENTITY AND SOCIAL CHANGE

1. January 26
   In-class: Introductions and overview of course. Brief readings and excerpts by Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldua, and Diane Garcia. Discuss testimony: breaking silence, bearing witness; celebrating/questioning/analyzing resistance; and advocating/arguing, accompanying. Exercise on personal and political motivations for writing.

2. February 2
   HW due:
   Reader Response: “Professions for Women” by Virginia Woolf, “Notes of a Native Son” by James Baldwin, “My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant” by Jose Vargas, and “Girl” by Alexander Chee.
   Writing Exercise: Develop one of the exercises from class. Extra prompt: how do you fit (or not fit) into history?
   In-class: What is a personal essay? Discussion and exercise on the use of literary tactics like showing vs. telling, theme, metaphor, voice, etc. in breaking silence and bearing witness.
   Handout: Personal Essay Assignment

3. February 9
   HW due:
   Reader Response: Brother, I’m Dying and “Create Dangerously” by Edwidge Danticat
   Writing exercise: Develop one of the exercises from class. Extra prompt: The first news story that made you angry.
   In-class: Discussion and exercises on objectivity vs. subjectivity in personal/political memoir.

4. February 16
   HW due:
   First draft of Personal Essay
   In-class: Workshop of Personal Essay.
   Brief readings and discussion: “Accompaniment as Policy” by Paul Farmer and “Terreno” by Zachary Knapp.
REPORTING ON SOCIAL CHANGE AND JUSTICE MOVEMENTS

5. February 23  
HW due:  
**Final Draft of Personal Essay:** Turn in with peer comments on first draft.  
**Reader Response:** “Why I Left White Nationalism” by R. Derek Black, “Hillbilly Elegy” by J.D. Vance, “Ticket to the Fair” by David Foster Wallace and “Transmissions from Camp Trans” by Michelle Tea  
**In-class:** Literary journalism of Tea and Wallace and essays explaining community from Black and Vance. Discussion and exercise on writing as both an observer and a member of a community. Collection of Final Draft of Personal Essay. Discuss Handouts: Interview/Observational Exercise & Reportage Assignment. Interview tips and activities.

6. March 2  
HW due:  
**Reader Response:** “The Armies of the Night” by Norman Mailer, “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” by Hunter S. Thompson, “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” by Joan Didion and excerpt from *About a Mountain* by John D’Agata (with readings on “Lifespan of a Fact”)  
**Writing exercise:** Develop one of the exercises from class. Extra prompt: A brief report on a community you've belonged to: why? When did your involvement or interest start, and how?  
**Note:** Turn in either Interview/Observational Exercise OR a Writing Exercise, depending on your progress.  
**In-class:** What can we learn from New Journalism? Exercise and discussion on the ethics of observation/subjective reporting. Discuss results of Interview/Observational Exercise.

7. March 9  
HW due:  
**Reader Response:** *Random Family* and interview with Adrian Nicole LeBlanc  
**Interview/Observational Exercise:** Interview an individual or visit a community you would like to write about.  
**Writing Exercise:** Develop one of the exercises from class. Extra prompt: Become a camera: record only what you see for one hour.  
**Note:** Turn in either Interview/Observational Exercise OR a Writing Exercise, depending on your progress.  
**In-class:** Discussion and exercise on obscuring/revealing your viewfinder. Discuss results of Interview/Observational Exercise.

March 16 – No class: Spring Break
8. March 23

Interview/Observational Exercise: Interview an individual or visit a community you would like to write about.

Writing Exercise: Develop one of the exercises from class. Extra prompt: Think of a time that you listened a long time to someone else speaking about a political issue, and you didn't get much of a chance to speak: what would you have said?

Note: Turn in either Interview/Observational Exercise OR a Writing Exercise, depending on your progress.

In-class: Discussion and exercise on informing vs. observing vs. analyzing. Discuss results of Interview/Observational Exercise.

9. March 30
HW due:
First draft of Reportage Assignment


ARGUMENT AND ADVOCACY FOR CHANGE

10. April 6
HW due:
Final Draft of Reportage Assignment: Turn in with peer comments on first draft.
Reader Response: excerpt from The New Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander, “On the Death of Sandra Bland and Our Vulnerable Bodies” and “Where Are Black Children Safe” by Roxane Gay, “We are NOT all Trayvon” by Asam Ahmad, “Ferguson Opened the Door” by Peniel E. Joseph, “Let America Be America Again” by Langston Hughes, Excerpt from “Citizen” by Claudia Rankine, and interview with Rankine in The New Yorker

In-class: Discussion and Exercise on first, second, and third person arguments (and poems)

11. April 13

Writing Exercise: Develop one of the exercises from class. Extra prompt: Find (or create) a photo or image that represents an important cause; use it as evidence to argue for a change.

In-class: Discussion and exercise on pathos, logos and ethos
12. April 20

**HW due:**
- **Reader Response:** *None of Us Were Like This Before* by Joshua Phillips
- **Scholarly Research Exercise:** Conduct research to inform your argument/advocacy
- **Writing Exercise:** Develop one of the exercises from class. Extra prompt: A list: Who, What, When, Where, Why and How? Apply this to your assignment so far.

*Note:* Turn in either Writing OR Scholarly Research exercises, depending on your progress

**In class:** Discussion and exercise on the range of types of research in advocacy and argument. Brief reports on Scholarly Research Exercise

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13. April 27

**HW due:**
- **Reader Response:** Susan Sontag, Michael Shuman, Wanda Coleman, Noam Chomsky and Elaine Scarry on 9/11.
- **Scholarly Research Exercise:** Conduct research to inform your argument/advocacy
- **Writing Exercise:** Develop one of the exercises from class. Extra prompt: What do you desperately want to improve?

*Note:* Turn in either Writing OR Scholarly Research exercises, depending on your progress

**In-class:** Discussion and exercise on rhetoric: counterargument, critique, proposal. Brief reports on Scholarly Research.

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14. May 4

**First Draft of Argument/Advocacy**

**In-class:** Workshop of Argument/Advocacy Assignment. Course evaluations. Festivity of some sort.

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May 11

**Final Draft of Argument/Advocacy:** Post to NYU Classes by 3:30 pm today.