"Human rights are, literally, the rights that one has simply because one is a human being."


Course Description: "The language of human rights," as the editors of a recent journal issue remarked, "is everywhere in play....In the past two decades, human rights have provided a preferred language for statements about morality and immorality, claims about justice and injustice." If human rights have become, in recent decades, a kind of lingua franca for making certain kinds of claims, this quote from Donnelly suggests, the definition of human rights can seem tautological, raising more questions than it answers. How is human being defined...and by whom? How are claims for human rights grounded, on what law, on what foundation? And who has the power to enforce them? What rights constitute those necessary to human beings?

Most often, it is legal scholars and practitioners and political scientists who engage these questions, but in this course we will explore what the humanities can contribute to an exploration of human rights. Of course, the very term "humanities" suggests the role that literature, philosophy, art and film have played in the representation and the construction of the rights-bearing individual-- and perhaps even, at times, in designating the boundaries of the human. The historian Lynn Hunt has argued that the emergence of the novel as a genre in the
eighteenth century is the site of the emergence of human rights: the novel invited its readers to engage with an individual’s story, to sympathize and empathize with a character whose situation might be quite different from the reader’s own. In more recent times, testimony, autobiography, plays, essays, and film have been recruited to expose violations of what we might call human rights, inciting awareness and sympathy—and sometimes action. We will begin by sketching a microhistory of the emergence of human rights, testing—and complicating—Hunt’s claims for the novel. Then we will move on to look at specific sites and issues. What are some different ways in which literary genres and discourses represent, render visible, and perhaps even constitute human rights violations? How do the techniques of representation associated with the literary communicate? What are the stakes of these forms of representation? How have writers negotiated the limits of genre and language to engage with that which cannot be readily represented? Have the norms of some forms of literary representation serve, paradoxically, to silence or occlude certain voices?

Learning Objectives: Through literary, historical, and philosophical texts, students will become acquainted with the modern history of the emergence of human rights discourse, and familiar with some of the conceptual frameworks and critiques that have emerged. Through careful reading of a number of literary texts, they will examine the ways in which literature has both framed and complicated some of the fundamental questions that haunt contemporary human rights discourse. They will engage, through writing, close reading, and discussion, with questions of how methods drawn from the humanities can help them to think critically about human rights and the politics that accompany and shape human rights claims.

Required Reading:


NB: Essays, designated on class schedule, will uniformly be on the Classes site.

Required Written Assignments: You will be asked to write short responses to the class reading on a weekly basis; you will write three short [4-6 page] papers, interrogating a theme or concept as it appears in a given text or series of texts; you will develop a final project on a topic and texts of your choosing, which will include a paper and a brief class presentation.

General Rules:

- Attendance and participation are REQUIRED. More than three unexcused absences will affect your grade negatively. More than five will cause you to fail the course. Absences for the observance of religious holidays are not included in this policy; please do alert me, however, if you must miss class for religious observance.

- This course is a seminar and therefore your preparedness and participation are essential.

- You must be on time; lateness not only affects your class performance but distracts everyone else.

- Electronic devices are permitted in this course only in so far as their use is related to our class work: note-taking, consulting readings that may be on-line or saved as documents, etc. Do not shop or using social media during class time.

- An important note on academic integrity:

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] for a full description of the academic integrity policy.
Class Schedule

[note that some of this schedule may change as we go along, depending on class interests and other factors]:

September 6: Introduction.

September 12: Declaring Rights

- Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen
- Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen, Olympe de Gouges
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- Supplemental: Hunt, Chapter 3, "'They have set a great example:' Declaring Rights," 113-143.
- Jean-Luc Nancy, "On Human Rights, Two Simple Remarks."
- Sarat and Kearns, "The Unsettled Status of Human Rights"

Enlightenment Histories: What is a right, anyway?

September 14:

- Caleb Williams, Preface and Volume 1, 1-102.

September 19: Caleb Williams, V. 2, 103-199.


September 21: Caleb Williams, v. 3, conclusion, 200-306.

- Douzinas, "The Classic Critiques of Rights: Marx and Burke"

September 26: Jacobs, H., Incidents. 5-50

September 28: Jacobs, H. Incidents. 59-99

- Hunt, Chapters 2 and 4,
October 3: Jacobs, Incidents, 100-142.

- Sadiya Hartman, from *Scenes of Subjection*
- Scott v. Sandford
- Coates, "The Case for Reparations"


October 10: Fall break.

Who is human? The borders of the human and the concept of bare life


October 17: Ishiguro, cont'd; 86-106.

October 19: Ishiguro, cont'd; 107-263.

- Agamben, from *Homo Sacer*
- Ranciere, "Who is the Subject of Human Rights?"

"A Mobile Army of Metaphors:" Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa


- brief history of South Africa [on classes]
- other materials, TBA

October 26: Krog, cont'd; 37-129.

October 31: Krog, cont'd; 131-149.

- Video of the TRC hearings

November 2: Krog, 150-174.

- Sanders, "Hearing Women" from Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in a Time of a Truth Commission
- Gobodo-Madizekela, "Trauma, Forgiveness and the Witnessing Dance."
November 7: Krog, 175-370.

- Documentary: Long Night’s Journey Into Day

November 9: Taylor, "Ubu and the Truth Commission" [text and video of performance]

The Subjects of Human Rights

November 14: Ondaatje, Anil’s Ghost,


November 16: Ondaatje, cont’d.

November 23-27: Thanksgiving Break

November 28: Ondaatje, cont’d.

- TBA

November 30: Ondaatje, cont’d


December 5: Butler, Frames of War, 1-32.


December 7: Butler, Frames, cont’d, 33-62.

Documentary: "Unmanned: America’s Drone Wars"

December 12: Class research conference. Presentations of final papers.

December 13: Class research conference.

December 14: Class research conference.

December 17: Final papers due.