The Body Impolitic

"Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulations of a lifetime gather there. In places the palimpsest is so heavily worked that the letters feel like braille. I like to keep my body rolled up away from prying eyes. Never unfold too much, tell the whole story." –Jeanette Winterson, Written on the Body

This course explores where flesh meets text and asks how and why it does. Through an eclectic mix of canonical and popular works, with a special focus on Lolita and on key theoretical texts by Foucault, Butler, and Sontag, we will investigate what bodies constitute and signify—and how constructions of the body are leveraged for political ends. The course will provide a context for contemporary feminist and queer rhetoric as well as for modern debates concerning free will and the right to one’s body.

Students will be encouraged throughout the course to relate the historical narrative sketched by the texts to contemporary constructions of sexuality, health, feminism, and science. The course will familiarize students with highly influential theories of corporality in the 20th century and will culminate in a research project in which each student will devise and articulate an original theoretical intervention into a scholarly conversation of their choosing. Throughout, we will draw out the theoretical in the literary and the literary in the theoretical, and will pay special attention to the relationship between embodied practice and (traditionally) disembodied thought.

Primary Texts:
Vladimir Nabokov, Lolita (1955)
Jeanette Winterson, Written on the Body (1993)
James Tiptree, Jr., “The Girl Who Was Plugged In” (1973)
Her (2013) (film)
Artworks by Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman

Secondary Texts:
Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals (1887)
Sigmund Freud, “Dora” Case Study (1905)
Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish (1975)
Susan Sontag, Illness as Metaphor (1978)
Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (1990)
Anne Fausto-Sterling, Sexing the Body (1993)
Alison Kafer, Feminist, Queer, Crip (2013)
Major Assignments:

• One short paper (5 pages) that performs a close reading of a moment in one text that expands upon or contradicts an extant scholarly reading of that moment. (This assignment will entail independent research in scholarly databases.)
• One short paper (5 pages) that compares the axiomatic and/or methodological differences between two of the theoretical texts read in class and explores the possible implications of their difference.
• A long research project (12-15 pages) that explores an aspect of how the body operates in one or multiple texts, with a view towards developing an intervention in or outcropping of the theories explored in class. This paper should include larger theoretical frames as well as close readings of specific texts, and may also involve historical/contextual research.

Learning Goals:

Skill-based:
1. Development of close reading skills;
2. Facility with locating and engaging secondary criticism that has direct bearing on students’ individual interests and research;
3. Developing arguments that bridge individual texts and general theories;
4. Proficiency in cogent and professional argumentation in the English discipline.

Content-based:
1. A set of basic frameworks for theorizing the body, especially in its relationship to literature;
2. Critical understanding of the meaning and use (or lack thereof) of politics in literature, especially as it surfaces in the course’s primary texts;
3. Thorough textual and contextual familiarity with certain canonical works.

Honor Code:

The Stanford University Fundamental Standard is a part of this course. It is agreed to by every student who enrolls at Stanford.

The Fundamental Standard states:

• Students at Stanford are expected to show both within and without the University such respect for order, morality, personal honor and the rights of others as is demanded of good citizens. Failure to do this will be sufficient cause for removal from the University.
• Students will not give or receive aid in examinations; they will not give or receive unpermitted aid in class work, in the preparation of reports, or in any other work that is to be used by the instructor as the basis of grading; and they will do their share and take an active part in seeing to it that others as well as themselves uphold the spirit and letter of the Honor Code.

If you are unclear about Stanford’s expectations of you as a student and a community member, re-read the Fundamental Standard.

The Fundamental Standard is most commonly violated in English classes by instances of plagiarism. These are frequently embarrassingly easy for instructors to identify, and, more importantly, it violates the fundamental purpose of this class: namely, to develop
theory in line with one’s personal experiences and values. Should you find yourself in a situation in which you have nothing or very little to turn in, it is far better to discuss the matter with me than to resort to drastic measures; we’ll work out a solution. Less egregious instances of plagiarism often involve the failure to cite work. We will pay special attention to citation throughout the class, so you will receive some education in that arena. Should you ever be in doubt about whether to cite, you should cite. Besides the ethics of the matter, citation strengthens your academic credibility in acknowledging your forebears and suggesting a wide scope of background reading.

Accessibility:
Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk; phone: 723-1066; oae.stanford.edu.

Grading:
The requirements for each assignment will be articulated in its respective assignment sheet. The general grading scale may be understood as follows:

- A: fulfills all requirements, offers original insights, and demonstrates strong writing and critical thinking skills.
- B: fulfills all requirements, offers sensible insights that may be a bit obvious or unoriginal, and demonstrates decent writing and critical thinking skills.
- C: fulfills most requirements, offers little insight, and suggests rushed production.
- D: fulfills some requirements, offers little or no insight, and demonstrates poor writing and/or critical thinking skills.
- F: does not fulfill requirements.

Attendance is required for all classes with the exception of documented illness and other urgent matters. It is your responsibility to contact the instructor as soon as possible should an emergency arise.

Given the short duration of the quarter, attendance is essential. After the first missed class, a 4-point deduction will be taken from the final grade for each missed session. Please also make an effort to arrive on time!

Of course, it goes without saying that you should do the reading; and with such a small group, participation is essential. Should the burden of reading become too onerous, contact me to let me know so we can work out a reasonable solution.

Late assignments will be penalized ten points for each day they are late, unless an agreement has been reached with the instructor in advance of the due date.

The course assignments will be weighted as follows:

- Paper 1, close reading: 25%
- Paper 2, theorist comparison: 25%
- Final paper, theoretical intervention: 35%
- Attendance, preparation, and participation: 15%
Schedule:

**Week 1**
Monday
DUE: Read “The Girl Who Was Plugged In”
In-class: Introductions; close-read Tiptree with a focus on form and political implications.

Wednesday
DUE: Read *On the Genealogy of Morals* (excerpted).
In-class: Discussion of the relationship between bodies and power, with historical contextualization of Nietzsche and Foucault. In-class writing assignment analyzing an aspect of Tiptree using Nietzsche as a theoretical lens.

**Week 2**
Monday
DUE: *Lolita* pp. 1-150
In-class: Introduction to *Lolita* with historical background and publication history. Discussion of close-reading techniques with short examples; group close-readings of Nabokov.

Wednesday
DUE: Read “Dora” case history; keep plugging away at *Lolita*
In-class: Library workshop with scholarly databases—formal instruction in locating, evaluating, and incorporating scholarship for the purposes of narrow research interests. Close-reading blogging in class.

**Week 3**
Monday
DUE: Finish *Lolita*; email to or meeting with instructor detailing the scene to be addressed in the first paper and a basic idea of how it might be read.
In-class: Close readings of “Dora” in concert with *Lolita*; mapping of psychoanalytic framings of the body against Nietzsche. In-class reading of Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* excerpts concerning confession.

Wednesday
DUE: Read Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (excerpted) and Butler, “From Parody to Politics”
In-class: In-class discussion of Butler and Foucault. Watch excerpts from *Paris is Burning* and use the Butler and Foucault to discuss drag politics.

**Week 4**
Monday
DUE: First paper, 5 pp. Short assignment (5 pp.) relating a student’s close reading of a moment in *Lolita* to an extant academic close reading of the same moment.
In-class: watch clip of *Lolita* and discuss the politics of representation and adaptation. Then review a series of artworks (shown in class) by Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger. Discussion of the ethics of voyeurism and consent. Individuals present informal in-class “close readings” of particular images.

**Wednesday**
Due: Sontag, “Illness as Metaphor”; Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (excerpted)
In-class: Discussion of rhetorics of wellness and the ethics of queer futures. Excerpts in class from *Hosos*. Revisitation of Foucault’s discussion of modes and meanings of quarantine and their politicization of illness.

**Week 5**
Monday
Due: *Written on the Body*, 1-100; Fausto-Stering, *Sexing the Body* (excerpted)
In-class: Discussion of materialities of text through the lens of the two assigned readings.

**Wednesday**
Due: Finish *Written on the Body*; read Wittig introduction
In-class: Continued discussion with emphasis on the gendering of language and French feminist aims to deconstruct and rethink that gendering.

**Week 6**
Monday
Due: Haraway, “Cyborg Manifesto”
In-class: Discussion of Haraway. Theorist mapping.

**Wednesday**
Due: Second paper, 5pp, comparing the axiomatic and/or methodical differences between two theoretical texts read in class.
In-class: Watch *Her*.

**Week 7**
Monday
Due: Read *Her* review, sex surrogate article, and pregnancy surrogate article.
In-class: Debrief of *Her* with an emphasis on cyborg culture. Assignment of final research paper (12-15 pp.) (Special emphasis on the theoretical snag explored in the second short paper assignment—could this be the germ of the research paper?)

**Wednesday**
Due: Paper ideas! (Have at least two that you’ve spent some time thinking about.)
In-class: Nuts and bolts of writing, emphasis on citation procedure; speed-dating brainstorm, with formation of “teams” based on shared interests.

**Week 8**
Monday
Due: Annotated bibliography of 8 potential sources; must include primary source, peer-reviewed article, and book (or chapter).
In-class: Resource workshop; exchange topics and find resources for one of the partners on your team.

Wednesday
Due: Meet with instructor by Wednesday about paper topic and (if possible) annotated bibliography. Write! Read Warner, “Uncritical Reading.”
In-class: Discussion of our modes of research. In-class introduction to reader-response theories, with various short examples (e.g., Stanley Fish).

Week 9
Monday
DAY OFF!

Wednesday
Due: First draft of the research paper.
In-class: Peer workshops in groups; emphasis on structure and ideas. Partner reverse-outlining.

Week 10
Monday
Due: Typed notes about the peer-review process sent both to instructor and to peer-review partners. Begin implementing revisions.
In-class: Debrief on written feedback. Interlude for locating articles that pertain to your partner’s argument for integration into their Wednesday presentation. Stylistic workshop.

Wednesday
Due: 10-minute presentations articulating the theoretical intervention offered in the paper and suggesting its contemporary relevance.
In-class: Celebration, and the presentations! Q+A with each presenter; be ready to think on your feet.

Final paper due: Friday, June 12, 5pm