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| COURSE: AP/EN 3179 | The Art of the Personal Essay - ONLINE |
| TERM: | June 29 to August 12 (S2) |
| Course Instructor: | Prof. Concetta Principe cprincip@yorku.ca and cvprincipe@rogers.com |
| Office Hours: | By appointment |
| Email consultation hours: | weekdays anytime |
| Time and Location: | ONLINE, TWICE A WEEK, Monday and Wednesday |

Expanded Course Description

“And on the loftiest throne in the world, we are still sitting only on our rumps.”

– Michel de Montaigne

While the essay, as a part of the non-fiction genre, can be said to have its origins in the biblical prophetic texts, the ‘modern’ essay, known as the ‘personal essay,’ is the innovation of the enlightenment thinker, Michel de Montaigne. He believed in the democratic nature of knowledge and mankind’s ability to solve problems with reason. Inspired by these beliefs, he launched his projects of the *essayer* (an attempt or a try), brief and informal explorations of a topic, drawing on philosophical reflection, historical facts, and anecdote, from an entirely personal perspective. Contemporary variations on this personal essay on topics such as the paradox of black subjectivity, the ethics of eating lobster, or the failure of public confessions may seem completely alien to Montaigne’s pre-industrial world, yet one can argue that the experimental nature of these personal essays fulfill the spirit of Montaigne’s vision. In this course, you will read a variety of personal essays, the traditional famous pieces (Montaigne, Orwell and King), the contemporary famous projects (Coates, Wallace and Carson) and the not so famous works (Levy, Gould and Hayes). In the process, you will have a chance to consider the art of essay writing, looking at the themes of interest to the essayist (truth, lies, ethics and persuasion), the rhetorical moves (argument, exposition, fallacy, metaphor) and the hybrid experiments (braided, mosaic, lyric and autofiction) that have come to formalize Montaigne’s generic invention.

REQUIRED TEXTS: the majority of readings are available online; a few readings will be available as PDFs, accessed through Fair Use:

Baldwin “Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis”; Benway “Trans Girl in Love”; Borges “On Blindness”; Carson “Irony is Not Enough: Essay on My Life as Catherine Deneuve”; Chesterton, “A Piece of Chalk”; Coates “Between the World and Me”; Davis “Foucault and Pencil”; Didion

“After Life” and “On Self Respect”; Dillard “Total Eclipse”; Gay “My Body is a Cage of my Own Making”; Gould “Exposed”; Ginsburg “He and I”; Hayes “The Lost Future Tense”; Huber “The Lava Lamp of Pain”; Kincaid “Girl”; King “Letter from Birmingham Jail”; Montaigne “Of Giving the Life”, “Of Liars”, “Of Fear” and “Of Solitude”; Wallace “Consider the Lobster”; Washuta “Apocalypse Logic.”

COURSE LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The specific objectives of the course are that students will be able to:

- Learn about the tradition and contemporary iterations of the ‘essay’ as a genre
- Demonstrate an understanding of formal aspects of the essay genre
- Develop critical reading and writing skills
- Practice writing the personal and the academic essay

EVALUATION

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| 20% | 4 X BRIEF ‘ESSAYERS’ (300 words each) |
| 15% | THE PERSONAL ESSAY (1000 words) – July 13 |
| 30% | FINAL ESSAY (2000-2500) – August 10 |
| 10% | PARTICIPATION |
| 10% | ‘ESSAYER’ PARTICIPATION |
| 15% | EXAM |

BRIEF ESSAYERS: These are short ‘essays’ that will be submitted on the Course Moodle on the morning of each class, for your colleagues’ review of and response to it. I will be marking each as a short personal essay. What is expected of you is defined in the Assignment Guidelines, available on the course Moodle.

THE PERSONAL ESSAY: By way of understanding the ‘personal essay’ you will write one, engaging with one of Montaigne’s essays that we read in the class. Guidelines on what will be expected of you for this will be made available. The length of this is to be 1000 words.

FINAL ESSAY: There will be a selection of essay topics distributed by week two, giving you the choice of doing an academic paper or a personal essay. Details will be described in the assignment outline posted on Moodle. The length of this assignment will be 200-2500 words.

PARTICIPATION: This course was initially designed as an in-class summer course, meeting twice weekly, from 6:30 to 9:30 pm. In the spirit of that structure, I have organized our 12 classes around two periods in the week, one beginning Monday morning, and one beginning on Wednesday morning. Exceptions to these days are the two holidays happening during our course (July 1 and August 3). The lectures will be posted on Moodle on the morning of each class: you will have a chance to engage in online discussions designed around these lectures for two days. If there is a chance to run a video conference, I will host a one hour discussion on either Monday or Wednesday, likely from 6 to 7 pm.

Participation will involve at least four (4) contributions to online discussion forums, per class. A single contribution is normally between two to five sentences. A one-line comment is not a contribution, though a question is valuable and useful, if it initiates discussion. On the other hand, a too-long contribution (more than 5 sentences) may not be useful either. The longer a contribution is, the less it can inspire responses. Remember that we are all participating and that means there is a lot of reading to be done which also means that we each should make the effort to keep our points simple and focus on one as opposed to many observations. It does happen, at times, that some students may participate in an exchange that is longer than just 4 contributions: I think anyone involved in that exchange has probably not even noticed she or he has made an extra contribution. It is something I hope for you all so that you can get to know your colleagues in the online world of a virtual classroom and use it for fruitful learning. Considering the size of this class, you will be divided into groups of 15 people, so as to control the amount of reading you are expected to do in these discussions.

For further information about how the participation is considered, please see “Notes on Participating in an Online Course” below.

NOTES ON PARTICIPATING IN AN ONLINE COURSE:

1. As a student, you can expect to devote about 5 hours a week to online participation, which will include the facetime meetings, if there is a program that we can access. This time emulates the twice weekly 3 hour meetings of the in-class course, and does not include the work you'll be doing the readings and writing your assignments.
2. This online course is designed to accommodate participation remotely. This means that no single time is set for checking in on the class discussion, except for that Monday and Wednesday face to face time, which I am trying to organize, if that happens. Since all of you are coming to the discussions at different times, make sure to visit the course several times in the period that the class is 'open'.
3. Since this online course has a quick pace, I am restricting access to discussions between the 'opening' of discussion and the 'closing' of discussion, per class. The first class of the week "opens" on Monday morning at 9 am with the posting of the lecture and "closes" on Tuesday at 11 am. Wednesday's class "opens" at 9 am with the posting of my lecture, and "closes" Thursday at 11 am. By "close" I literally mean that contributions after this time are not considered for participation.
4. My online presence will be variable throughout these "open" periods, with a possible (and preferred) one-hour video conference between 6 and 7 pm on Monday and or Wednesday. In the possible video-conferencing, I hope to build on the discussion already initiated by your responses to lecture questions in the Discussion Forums.
5. Since participation marks can only be based on your online engagement, I am outlining here the expectations I have of your contributions to the Moodle discussion forums designed for this course, and specifically, the minimum number of contributions. Your Discussion Participation will be assessed by your contribution to the weekly discussions of the lecture questions posted in the Discussion Forum; your Essayer Participation will

be based on your responses to your colleagues' *essayers* posted in the *Essayer* Discussion Forum. In the former, one response to each of two lecture discussion forums is expected for every 'class': your contribution may be a direct response to my question, or an engagement with your colleagues' ideas. The *Essayer* Participation mark will be based on the following: one response to two 'essayers' by a colleague's work in groups of no more than 15 students. Your response can involve commenting on the *Essayer* topic, raising some 'friendly' counter-arguments or reflecting on how the piece engages a reading of the week. These *Essayer* responses are not meant to critique the writing, but to reflect on or respond to the essay, with a positive and critical eye, as we are doing with all the readings in this course. The person who has posted is expected to monitor and as needed, respond, to colleagues' comments. That is, whether you are the writer of the mini essay, or the reader with comments, you are expected to contribute.

6. I will be monitoring all discussions from Monday to Thursday, making comments here and there.
7. My 'office hour' is technically, whenever you need to communicate with me, but not weekends: I will respond to emails within the day, and will be available for a Zoom meeting, with 24-hours notice.

GENERAL RULES FOR THE COURSE

ONLINE COMMUNICATION: Courtesy is very important when communicating in the virtual classroom of online learning. I am sure you all know the rule against ALL CAPS: please do not use them unless you are quoting a source that is using them in which case the quote should be in quotations and the author identified. Also, as you know, irony and jokes rely heavily on visual or auditory cues, which is why, in the virtual world, they may be inexplicable, unhelpfully ambiguous and or easily misconstrued, so it is best to avoid these also.

ESSAY SUBMISSIONS: The *Essayer* Submissions are to be posted to the Moodle Group *Essayer* Discussion Forum. If you are unable to submit yours on the morning of a given class, plan to write and submit on another day. All other essays (Personal Essay and Final Paper) are to be submitted to Turnitin by 11:59 pm of the day the assignment is due, as per the class schedule.

LATE SUBMISSIONS: for every day your first or second paper is late, you will lose 3%, unless you can provide a doctor's note accounting for the lateness. I will also deduct 2% per day that the *Essayer* is submitted late. That said, once the *essayer* is two days late, discussion potential has disappeared, so plan your submissions early so that you can get people reading and responding.

I assume you all know the policies about plagiarism in place at York. For your review, here is a link: <http://www.yorku.ca/secretariat/policies/document.php?document=69>

EN 3179 – CLASS SCHEDULE

June 29: INTRO – The personal essay, terms, overview of the course... and your personal essay

I: THE PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF TIME AND PLACE

JULY 6: The “Essayer”

1. Montaigne – “Of Giving the Lie,” “Of Liars,” “Of Fear” and “Of Solitude”
<http://aftermontaigne.org/complete-essays/>
2. F. J Levy “Of Liars” and Chris Arthur “Of Solitude” (Montaigne website)

JULY 8: Of Letters

1. Martin Luther King – “Letter from Birmingham Jail”
http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/letter_birmingham_jail.pdf
2. James Baldwin – “An Open Letter to My Sister Miss Angela Davis”
<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1971/01/07/an-open-letter-to-my-sister-miss-angela-davis/?fbclid=IwAR0ecUQqNSHMHINgqLh7TEBJbGUTXakAE88p5Yw6NPoYldWbSqbYCYgkGKY>
3. Ta-Nahesi Coates – “Between the World and Me”
<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/tanehisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me/397619/>

JULY 13: Of Things

1. G. K. Chesterton – “A Piece of Chalk” <https://www.chesterton.org/a-piece-of-chalk/>
2. Lydia Davis - “Foucault and Pencil” from *The Next American Essay*, Ed. John D’Agata (pdf)¹

ESSAY 1 – Rewriting Montaigne “Of Liars” – 1000 words

II: THE PERSONAL INVESTIGATION

JULY 15: Of Ethics

1. George Orwell “Shooting an Elephant” – <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/shooting-an-elephant/>
2. David Foster Wallace “Consider the Lobster”
<http://www.columbia.edu/~col8/lobsterarticle.pdf>

¹ NB: the pdf includes “1996”, which you can read if you’d like, but it’s not required reading

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JULY 20: Of Events

1. Joan Didion – After Life <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/25/magazine/after-life.html>
2. Annie Dillard’s – “Total Eclipse”
<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/08/annie-dillards-total-eclipse/536148/>

JULY 22: Of the Body

1. Jamaica Kincaid – “Girl”
<https://www.bpi.edu/ourpages/auto/2017/10/14/55813476/Girl%20Jamaica%20Kincaid.pdf>
2. Roxanne Gay – My Body is a Cage of My Own Making
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jul/01/roxane-gay-my-body-is-a-cage-of-my-own-making>

JULY 27: Of Self-Respect

1. Joan Didion – “On Self Respect” <https://www.vogue.com/article/joan-didion-self-respect-essay-1961>
2. Emily Gould “Exposed” - <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/25/magazine/25internet-t.html>
 - Recommended: Jia Tolentino – “The Personal Essay Boom is Over”
<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/jia-tolentino/the-personal-essay-boom-is-over>

III: THE PERSONAL ESSAYISTIC EXPERIMENT

JULY 29: Of Perspective

Louis Borges – “On Blindness” from *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Ed. Phillip Lopate (pdf)
Sonya Huber - “The Lava Lamp of Pain” <https://therumpus.net/2014/12/the-sunday-rumpus-essay-the-lava-lamp-of-pain/>

AUG 5: Of Politics

1. Gwen Benway – “Trans Girl In love” - <https://tnq.ca/trans-girl-love/>
2. Elisa Washuta – Apocalypse Logic <https://theoffingmag.com/insight/apocalypse-logic/>

AUG 10: Of Self

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1. Natalie Ginsburg - "He and I" from *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Ed. Phillip Lopate (pdf)
2. Anne Carson – Irony is Not Enough: Essay on My Life as Catherine Deneuve" from *Men in the Off Hours* (pdf)

FINAL PAPER DUE

AUG 12: Of Covid 19

Jason Hayes "The Lost Future Tense" <https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/the-lost-future-tense>

Exam to be held during the exam period