

POLS 4734: Politics & Literature
Fall 2022
Meetings: Hellem 267 MWF 2:30-3:20pm
Professor Scott B. Ritner
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Office Hours: Mondays 4-6pm or by appointment on Zoom

Politics and Literature

Course Description: Literature (broadly understood) has, historically, been a conduit for political statements of all stripes. It has been a way to hide one's arguments in the mouths of others, to outwit censors, to provide cover for the writer, and to challenge or reinforce the status quo. Over the course of the semester, this class will approach political themes – historically rooted – through the reading of modern and contemporary literature. Readings will be drawn from modern African, Anglo-American, Asian, European, and Latin American writers including Zoe Wicomb, Venedikt Erofeev, Allen Ginsberg, Lindsay Lerman, adrienne maree brown and others. Each literary work will be paired with a complementary theoretical text that deals directly with the literature itself or a contemporaneous writing engaging with the same themes as the fictional work. Students will be challenged to write critically, analytically, and creatively over the course of the semester. Through our literary works, we will talk about the politics of a broad array of topics including race, comedy, climate change, and book bans.

Classroom Conduct: During the course of this semester we will be delving into some topics that are emotionally charged, personal, or otherwise distressing for some students. Among other topics, we will be discussing forms of oppression based on race, gender, religion, and sexuality. Students are expected to engage with sensitive topics in a class on political theory. Throughout the course of the semester we will be dealing with questions of truth rather than fact. This distinction is important because while absolute truth can be posited it can also be challenged as such. There is no single person who is able to attain absolute truth, not the professor, not your fellow students, and not yourself. Dialogue will be the driver of our class sessions. At times, class discussions will be tense. I encourage you to disagree with your fellow students, and with me. That said, outward hostility, *ad hominem* attacks, intimidation, and any other form of disrespectful behavior towards fellow students will not be tolerated. The classroom is a safe and sacred space for the discussion of difficult themes and thus must remain one of respectful discourse.

Furthermore, this course has been designed to engage with authors of a plethora of racial, gender, and national identities. Students will be expected to engage honestly with literature that may challenge their assumptions, their way of life, and their position in society. This will include texts by both left-wing thinkers who may not have respect for your mother who is an entrepreneur and right-

wing thinkers who may not have respect for your father who is an immigrant. Compassion (without prejudice) for your fellow students will be tested at times because of these readings.

Course Requirements: Your final grade will be deduced based on the completion and quality of six elements. **Class participation (10%)** is exactly that, your participation in class discussions, your attendance, and your preparation for each class session. **Group Discussion Participation (10%)** is based on your active participation in breakout groups for discussion in class. A **Protest Song Assignment** when you will bring a song and a few sentences that analyze the song in accordance with Angela Davis' essay on Billie Holliday's Strange Fruit. A **Critical Book Paper (25%)** that addresses the politics and historical context of class readings in 1,800- 2,000 words. One **Podcast Assignment (25%)** you will discuss one of the books we read in class with a classmate. A **Meme Assignment (10%)** in which you will make a meme based on a short story. A **Short Story (10%)** of your own imagination (approximately 5 pages). The short story is graded on the basis of completion rather than content.

Grading Rubric:

- A.** Excellent work, with clear, challenging, original ideas supported by sufficient, appropriate, logically interpreted evidence. The essay should engage the reader in the inquiry, convincingly answer opposing views, be well organized, and free of significant grammatical flaws. An 'A' paper should be not just good but outstanding in ideas and presentation. An 'A' paper is not completely without flaws, but they are minimal, at best.
- B.** Good to very good work, with a clear thesis supported by sufficient, appropriate citation, organized and interpreted comprehensively. The 'B' paper may have some outstanding qualities but be marked by significant flaws which keep it from being an 'A'; or it may be all-around good work, free of major problems but lacking the deeper insight necessary for excellence.
- C.** Satisfactory work, but not yet good. The 'C' paper meets the basic requirements of an argument supported by interpretation of specific evidence, but still needs work in thinking and/or presentation. There may be a lack of clarity, the evidence may not always be sufficient or appropriate, citation may be sloppy, or the interpretation may have significant flaws. The essay may have organizational or mechanical problems that keep it from being good. The 'C' paper may be good in some respects but poor in others, or it may simply be adequate or inconsistent overall.
- D.** A barely passing work that shows effort but is too inherently flawed to be considered satisfactory. Papers without a readily identifiable argument, or significant flaws in the execution thereof, are likely to be graded 'D'.
- F.** Failing work -- for example, a hasty, sloppy paper that shows little or no thought, effort, or familiarity with the text.

Evaluation: Your final grade will be calculated as follows:

- 10% - Class Participation
- 10% - Group Discussion Participation
- 10% - Protest Song Assignment
- 25% - Critical Book Paper
- 25% - 1 Podcast assignment
- 10% - Meme Assignment
- 10% - Short Story

Late Assignment Policy/Assignment Submission Policy:

Assignments will be submitted through the course Canvas page on their due date in PDF format unless otherwise noted in the assignment description (the interviews and the meme, will have different formats).

Classroom Behavior: Both students and faculty are responsible for maintaining an appropriate learning environment in all instructional settings, whether in person, remote or online. Those who fail to adhere to such behavioral standards may be subject to discipline. Professional courtesy and sensitivity are especially important with respect to individuals and topics dealing with race, color, national origin, sex, pregnancy, age, disability, creed, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, veteran status, political affiliation or political philosophy. For more information, see the policies on [classroom behavior](#) and the [Student Conduct & Conflict Resolution policies](#).

Requirements for COVID-19: As a matter of public health and safety, all members of the CU Boulder community and all visitors to campus must follow university, department and building requirements and all public health orders in place to reduce the risk of spreading infectious disease. CU Boulder currently requires COVID-19 vaccination and boosters for all faculty, staff and students. Students, faculty and staff must upload proof of vaccination and boosters or file for an exemption based on medical, ethical or moral grounds through the [MyCUHealth portal](#).

The CU Boulder campus is currently mask-optional. However, if public health conditions change and masks are again required in classrooms, students who fail to adhere to masking requirements will be asked to leave class, and students who do not leave class when asked or who refuse to comply with these requirements will be referred to [Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution](#). For more information, see the policy on [classroom behavior](#) and the [Student Code of Conduct](#). If you require accommodation because a disability prevents you from fulfilling these safety measures, please follow the steps in the “Accommodation for Disabilities” statement on this syllabus.

If you feel ill and think you might have COVID-19, if you have tested positive for COVID-19, or if you are unvaccinated or partially vaccinated and have been in close contact with someone who has COVID-19, you should stay home and follow the further guidance of the [Public Health Office](#) (contacttracing@colorado.edu). If you are fully vaccinated and have been in close contact with someone who has COVID-19, you do not need to stay home; rather, you should self-monitor for symptoms and follow the further guidance of the [Public Health Office](#) (contacttracing@colorado.edu).

My policy on absences is that you give me advance notice, by email, if you are going to miss class. I do not need to know the reason, just that you will be absent. I ask that you please do not abuse this trust.

Accommodation for Disabilities: If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please submit your accommodation letter from Disability Services to your faculty member in a timely manner so that your needs can be addressed. Disability Services determines accommodations based on documented disabilities in the academic environment. Information on requesting accommodations is located on the [Disability Services website](#). Contact Disability Services at 303-492-8671 or dsinfo@colorado.edu for further assistance. If you have a temporary medical condition, see [Temporary Medical Conditions](#) on the Disability Services website.

If there is anything I can do, in addition to these guidelines, to make this class more accessible for you, please let me know by the end of September.

Preferred Student Names and Pronouns: CU Boulder recognizes that students' legal information doesn't always align with how they identify. Students may update their preferred names and pronouns via the student portal; those preferred names and pronouns are listed on instructors' class rosters. In the absence of such updates, the name that appears on the class roster is the student's legal name.

Honor Code: All students enrolled in a University of Colorado Boulder course are responsible for knowing and adhering to the Honor Code academic integrity policy. Violations of the Honor Code may include, but are not limited to: plagiarism, cheating, fabrication, lying, bribery, threat, unauthorized access to academic materials, clicker fraud, submitting the same or similar work in more than one course without permission from all course instructors involved, and aiding academic dishonesty. All incidents of academic misconduct will be reported to the Honor Code (honor@colorado.edu); 303-492-5550). Students found responsible for violating the academic integrity policy will be subject to nonacademic sanctions from the Honor Code as well as academic sanctions from the faculty member. Additional information regarding the Honor Code academic integrity policy can be found on the [Honor Code website](#).

Prof. Ritner's note: The best way to get the most out of this class is to do the work yourself. I'm not big on bureaucratic processes, but if you plagiarize, you will fail the class.

Sexual Misconduct, Discrimination, Harassment and/or Related Retaliation: CU Boulder is committed to fostering an inclusive and welcoming learning, working, and living environment. The university will not tolerate acts of sexual misconduct (harassment, exploitation, and assault), intimate partner violence (dating or domestic violence), stalking, or protected-class discrimination or harassment by or against members of our community. Individuals who believe they have been subject to misconduct or retaliatory actions for reporting a concern should contact the Office of Institutional Equity and Compliance (OIEC) at 303-492-2127 or email cureport@colorado.edu. Information about university policies, [reporting options](#), and the support resources can be found on the [OIEC website](#).

Please know that faculty and graduate instructors have a responsibility to inform OIEC when they are made aware of incidents of sexual misconduct, dating and domestic violence, stalking, discrimination, harassment and/or related retaliation, to ensure that individuals impacted receive information about their rights, support resources, and reporting options. To learn more about reporting and support options for a variety of concerns, visit [Don't Ignore It](#).

Religious Holidays: Campus policy regarding religious observances requires that faculty make every effort to deal reasonably and fairly with all students who, because of religious obligations, have conflicts with scheduled exams, assignments or required attendance.

See the [campus policy regarding religious observances](#) for full details.

You will also see that we will not meet on either Monday September 26 or Wednesday October 5 because I will be observing Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the Jewish New Year and Day of Atonement, respectively. As with other absences, prior notice without explanation is requested.

If needed, please be sure to make any necessary academic arrangements in advance of due dates so that I can best assist you.

Statement on Academic Freedom: Your academic freedom and mine does not require that you agree with me, nor that I agree with you. It does not require that I, as the course instructor, make pretense of “impartiality” or objectivity (these are mythical things when it comes to politics!). It does, however, require a good faith effort on both my part and yours to make a coherent and thoughtful argument, and to consider that there is more to learn. <https://www.cu.edu/regents/law/7>

Required Readings: Books are available at the [CU Book Store](#) at 1669 Euclid Ave 36 UCB Boulder, CO 80309-0036. Here is a second link: <https://www.cubookstore.com/>. All readings not listed here will be provided as a PDF via the course website.

- Venedikt Erofeev, *Moscow to the End of the Line*, trans. H. William Tjalsma (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1992).
- Allen Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2001).
- Lindsay Lerman, *I'm From Nowhere* (Troy, NY: Clash Books, 2019).
- adrienne maree brown, *Grievors* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2021).

All other readings are available for download on the course website.

Useful Websites and Podcasts: This is a list of websites that may offer some more extensive background or short-form analysis of our readings and thinkers who are not on the syllabus but may have relevance to our topics, presented in no particular order.

- The Partially Examined Life: <http://partiallyexaminedlife.com/>
- The History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps: <https://www.historyofphilosophy.net/>
- Critical Theory: <http://www.critical-theory.com/>

- Mute Magazine: <http://www.metamute.org/>
- Post 45: <https://post45.org/>
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://plato.stanford.edu/>

Course Schedule:

The readings are listed for the day that we will discuss them. Please be prepared in class with the readings and a notebook.

As course instructor I reserve the right to alter the readings based on unforeseen scheduling events, contemporary political events, illness, weather, etc. I do offer this guarantee: I will not eliminate any books or readings if I have required you to buy the book.

Please be sure to read the texts in the order they are listed on the syllabus.

This is a READING INTENSIVE class. This doesn't mean that there is always A LOT of reading, but that the readings will drive the course. If you do not do your best to do the reading, you will definitely be lost. We will be discussing the texts, what they say, how they say it, what they mean, etc.

Part I:

Week 1: August 22-26 – Introduction:

- Monday
 - Introductions.
 - The plan for the semester.
 - Why Politics & Literature.
- Wednesday
 - What is Close Reading?
- Friday
 - Close reading practice to be distributed in class

Week 2: August 29-September 2 – The Politics of Literature?:

- Monday: Introductory Theories
 - Terry Eagleton, "What is Literature?" in *Literary Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 1-15.
 - Pierre Macherey, "What is Literature Thinking About?" in *The Object of Literature* trans. David Macey, 1-10 (New York; Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- Wednesday: Interpretation and Responsibility
 - *Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation" in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, 1-10.

- Simone Weil, “The Responsibilities of Literature,” *Late Philosophical Writings*, trans. Eric O. Springsted and Lawrence E. Schmidt (Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 151-154.
- Friday: The “politics” of literature
 - Terry Eagleton, “Political Criticism,” in *Literary Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 169-190.

Week 3: September 5-9: One Children’s Book, One Story about Childhood and Growing Up:

- **Monday: NO CLASS, LABOR DAY**
- Wednesday: *The Story of Ferdinand*
 - Walter Benjamin, “Children’s Literature” in *Selected Writings Vol. 2 Part 2*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999).
 - Maria Popova, “The Bittersweet Story of the Real-Life Peaceful Bull Who Inspired Munro Leaf and Robert Lawson’s Ferdinand” in *The Marginalian*, July 9, 2002./ <https://www.themarginalian.org/2022/07/09/ferdinand-civilon/>
 - Bruce Handy, “When *The Story of Ferdinand* Became Fodder for the Culture Wars of its Era,” in *The New Yorker* December 15, 2017. (pdf.)
 - In class Reading of *The Story of Ferdinand*.
- Friday: A story about growing up (and other things)
 - Ken Liu, “The Paper Menagerie,” in *The Paper Menagerie and Other Stories* (New York: Saga Press, 2016), 178-192.

Week 4: September 12-16: Banned Books I: Obscenity and Socialism:

- Monday: American Carnage:
 - Allen Ginsberg, “Howl” and “Footnote to Howl,” in *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco, City Lights, 1959), 9-27.
 - **Meme Assignment Due**
- Wednesday: Socialist Poetry?
 - Allen Ginsberg, “A Supermarket in California” and “America,” in *Howl and Other Poems*, 29-30 and 39-43.
- Friday: No Class: Profession Ritner at a Conference:
 - Watch *Howl* on your own time - I will announce how to stream this soon.

Week 5: September 19-23: More Poetry—Revolutionary Beats and Radical feminism

- Monday: Revolutionary Beatniks:
 - Dianne di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters*, selections.
- Wednesday: Black Feminism
 - Audre Lorde, “Power,” “Poem for a woman in rage,” “The Master’s Tools”
 - Combahee River Collective Statement
- Friday: Revolutionary Black Feminism:

- Angela Davis, “Strange Fruit” in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 181-197
- In Class– Protest Songs (There are rules, I will tell you them on Wednesday)

Week 6: September 26-30: Soviet Space and Samizdat I: Preparing for Moscow to the End of the Line.

- **Monday–No Class, Rosh Hashannah**
- Wednesday: The pace of life
 - Walter Benjamin, “Moscow” in *Selected Writings Vol. 2 Part 2*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999).
- Friday: Samizdat, definitions and material existences
 - Ann Komaromi, “The Material Existence of Soviet Samizdat,” in *Slavic Review*, Autumn, 2004, Vol. 63, No. 3 (Autumn, 2004), pp. 597-618

Week 7: October 3-7: *Moscow to the End of the Line*

- Monday: Venedikt Erofeev, *Moscow to the End of the Line*, trans. H. William Tjalsman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994), 1-27 (stop at chapter heading “Karacharovo–Chucklinka)
- **Wednesday: No Class Yom Kippur**
- Friday: Erofeev, 27-78 (stop at chapter heading Esino–Friazevo)

Week 8: October 10-14: *Moscow to the End of the Line*

- Monday: Erofeev, 78-117 (stop at chapter heading Orekhovo-Zuevo–Krutoe)
- Wednesday: Erofeev, 117-151 (stop at Petushki, The Platform)
- Friday: Erofeev, 151-164; Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), selections.

Week 9: October 17-21: Race, Space, and Place

- Monday: In South Africa:
 - Zoë Wicomb, “You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town”
 - Steve Biko, “Let’s Talk About Bantustans” in *I write What I Like: A Selection of His Writings*, ed. Aelred Stubbs C.R., 44-65 (Johannesburg: Picador South Africa, 1978).
 - Watch: District 6 and CPUT:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=29&v=-xs3jeqyiZQ&feature=emb_logo
- Wednesday: Racial Segregation in the US:
 - Two articles on red-lining in the Front Range:

<https://www.denverpost.com/2021/11/02/false-egg-rino-denver-fashion-redlining-greening/> and https://www.denverpost.com/2022/07/27/wheat-ridge-racist-covenants-house-illegal/?utm_email=457334E3346FA554952452BE25&g2i_eui=NQlb1lwb%2bIRgD

[r6u%2f0nL%2bHNnqqaSXc63q0pMGpssWHU%3d&g2i_source=newsletter&lctg=457334E3346FA554952452BE25&active=no&utm_source=listrak&utm_medium=email&utm_term=https%3a%2f%2fwww.denverpost.com%2f2022%2f07%2f27%2fwhe%2fwhite-at-ridge-racist-covenants-house-illegal%2f&utm_campaign=denver-the-spot&utm_content=curated](https://www.denverpost.com/2022/07/27/white-at-ridge-racist-covenants-house-illegal/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_term=https%3a%2f%2fwww.denverpost.com%2f2022%2f07%2f27%2fwhe%2fwhite-at-ridge-racist-covenants-house-illegal%2f&utm_campaign=denver-the-spot&utm_content=curated)

- adrienne maree brown, *Grievors* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2021), pages to be determined
- Friday: andrienne maree brown, *Grievors*, pages to be determined
 - Frantz Fanon, “The Black Man and Language” in *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox, 1-23 (New York; Grove Press, 2008).

Week 10: October 24-28: Policing and Revolt

- Monday: *Grievors*,
 - Mariame Kaba, “The System Isn’t Broken” and “Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police.”
- Wednesday: *Grievors*,
 - Tobi Haslett, “Magic Actions” in *N+1*, Summer 2021.
<https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-40/politics/magic-actions-2/>
- Friday: *Grievors*,

Week 11: October 31-November 4: Pandemic Politics

- Monday: *Grievors*,
- Wednesday: Watch: Jeff Burnaby, *Blood Quantum*, Streaming Details to come.
- Friday: A discussion, is Covid over? What is to come?
 - **Critical Book Paper Due 11:59pm**

Week 12: November 7-11: Human Crisis—Grief and Climate

- Monday: Sexuality, Loss, and Work.
 - Lindsay Lerman, *I’m From Nowhere* (Troy, NY: Clash Books, 2019), 1-37 (Chapters 1-7)
 - Silvia Federici, “Why Sexuality Is Work”
- Wednesday: Friendship, or something like it
 - Watch: Bonnie Honig, “Antigone Interrupted, Greek Tragedy and the Future”:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NwCIVN8GJOU>
 - Lerman, 39-78 (Chapters 8-11)
- Friday
 - Jacob Blumenfeld, “Climate barbarism: Adapting to a wrong world,” in *Constellations* (31 January 2022).
 - Nick Bowlin, “The feds declined to seriously cut Colorado River water use. Here’s what that means,” in *High Country News*, August 18, 2022

Week 13: November 14-18: One is not born a woman

- Monday:
 - Lerman, 79-110 (Chapters 12-17)
- Wednesday: Lerman, 111-150 (Chapters 18-the end)
 - Roxanne Dunbar, "Female Liberation as the Basis for Social Revolution"
 - Monique Wittig, "One is Not Born a Woman"
- Friday: In class meetings about Podcast assignment

No Class Fall Break: November 21-25

Week 14 November 28-December 2: One long poem and two short stories about fascism

- Monday: The Cosmic Race
 - Wendy Trevino, "Brazilian is not a race"
 - Jose Vasconcelos, "The Cosmic Race"
- Wednesday: Jorge Luis Borges, "Deutsches Requiem"
- Friday: Franz Kafka, "In The Penal Colony"
 - Podcast Assignment due, 11:59pm.

Week 15: December 5-9: Wrap up and work on short stories

- Monday: Wrap up, what is the politics of literature?
- Wednesday: In class short-story writing time.
- Friday: In class short-story workshop time (in groups)

Final Due Dates: Short Story is due on the day we would otherwise have our final exam (TBA).