

LT280: Encounters With The Other

Seminar Leader: Joshua Yaffa
Email: joshuayaffa@gmail.com
Office Hours: By appointment

How do we imagine those who inhabit lives far different from our own? And what happens when we come face-to-face with those we initially consider the “Other?” In this course, students will read a range of literature—on the hermetic world of North Korea, hardship and deprivation in the American inner city, among other selections—in which authors have purposely put themselves in foreign, unfamiliar situations, to varying results. Some encounters produce insight and empathy; others reveal how broad the gap in experience can be. Can the act of reporting and writing bridge this divide, or does it remain impassible? Led by Bard College Berlin’s inaugural writer-in-residence, students will consider their own relationship to the “Other” as they imagine and define it, and work through the question with their own writing assignments.

Requirements

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation. If you must miss class for religious observance, an athletic trip, or an official extra-curricular event, please let me know at the beginning of the semester so those absences can be excused. If you become seriously ill or if a personal family emergency will cause you to miss more than two classes, please let me know as soon as possible. Bard College Berlin does not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Class Participation

Discussion and participation are essential to the overall success of this course. Each week, you are required to participate in a discussion about the readings. We will engage in conversation, responding to one other, and add additional information or thoughts about the relevant readings. It will be your responsibility to come to class ready, having read the texts assigned and willing to take part in analyzing, debating, and expanding on the ideas contained therein. On a rotating basis, a small group of students (two to three people per session) will be responsible for leading the discussion of the week's readings. While this group will act as moderators of the given week's class discussion, they are not its only participants—all of us are. This grade will also reflect your level of investment in classroom discussion. (20% of grade)

“As Told To” Oral History

We will read (and listen) to a number of “as told to” first-person narratives and then create our own, of 800-1000 words. During class we will discuss format and technique, and there will be a high degree of flexibility and openness in choice of subject and approach to telling their story in their own voice. (20% of grade)

Short Report on Place

For this writing assignment you will observe a place you identify as representing an “other” environment and write a short essay of 800-1000 words describing its sights, sounds, smells, and so on. You may engage as an active, present reporter and interact with people in this setting, but that is not required. It can merely be a detailed, vivid, finely observed portrait of a place. We will read examples of this kind of essay, as well. I will also discuss in more detail how you might approach this essay, which is meant more as a reporting and writing exercise in preparation for the final essay below rather than an intensive or all-consuming text. (20% of grade)

Final Reported Essay

This essay will represent the culmination of our work together this semester. You will find a character (or set of characters) and/or location, neighborhood, or other setting that in some way represents the “other” to your own personal experience, background, or however you choice to define “other” on the basis of your familiarity and comfort. (We will have a quick pitch session in class in which we will tell one another of our intended subjects before we embark on

this reporting and writing assignment.) You will spend time immersing yourself and communicating with the inhabitants of this environment. In other words, as opposed to the shorter essay above, this will require more active reportorial engagement from your side: you will have to introduce yourself, ask questions, involve yourself in the life and comings and goings of the place and people about which you are writing. Multiple visits will presumably be required; this is an unlikely to be an assignment you can complete in an afternoon. The goal is to enter into and begin to understand an unfamiliar world, and then, with that knowledge, tell us about what you have observed and learned. I will be available outside of class hours to offer advice and guidance to those needing it. The final length is not so important but you should aim for a text (you can call it a piece of reportage, an essay, whatever you like) of no less than 2,000 words and certainly no more than 5,000, probably somewhere right in between. You are encouraged to form writing groups to discuss your drafts with each other. We will discuss the precise timeline for this essay as the semester develops. (40% of grade)

Cell Phones and Notebooks

Cell phone noises can disturb interaction, dialogue, and concentration of the whole class. Cell phones must be shut off upon entrance to the classroom; texting is not allowed. If you need to text or call, you must ask for permission to step out of the class. Laptops and notebooks are permitted when we need them for specific research tasks in class; otherwise, they are to remain closed. Any kind of recording during class is forbidden.

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed upon by both parties.

Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Course structure

Session 1: January 29

Introduction and discussion of the “other”

Students will introduce themselves and become acquainted with the instructor and the overarching themes of the class. What is the other? How do we define and imagine this concept for ourselves? Where is it possible to engage with the other? What are the potential pitfalls, dangers, and blind spots we should be aware of? Students will share their own ideas and goals for what they want out of the course and where they expect to be challenged. We'll also go over some ideas of how we might write for this class—perhaps a very different style than the academic approach favored in other classes.

Session 2: February 5

Empathy, engagement, listening

We will discuss and respond to the week's readings, with a goal of understanding how the respective authors approached the task of listening, recording, and retelling the stories of their subjects. Do these first-person narratives sound genuine, convincing, and real? Why or why not? Do you think the reporter and writer was comfortable, or not so much, during the process? What about the subject? And what is the role of editing and authorial voice in such pieces? In the second half of class, we will prepare for our own assignment to craft a similar first-person oral history. We will discuss what kind of subjects we might consider and how we can go about the reporting process.

Selections from:

“Working” by Studs Terkel

Svetlana Alexeivich

The New Yorker “As Told To”

(distributed by instructor)

Session 3: February 12

The promise and (potential) pitfalls of reporting

We will discuss the process of reporting the oral-history assignment. What challenges are you encountering? Any questions before the piece of writing is due next week? Next we will turn to this week's readings as we turn continue our examination of the course's central themes: how outsiders encounter unfamiliar, foreign, uncomfortable places and people and emerge with a deeper understanding they share with readers. This is the first week when students will

moderate the discussion. Some questions to consider: how did the reporter-writers gain access and trust of their subjects? Does this feel like a fair and honest exchange? Are there certain things the outsider might observe or pick up on as important that an insider might miss? What about the opposite? As students begin to think of themselves as reporters, what will they keep in mind?

Readings:

“Among the Thugs” Bill Buford

“Out There Part I,” *The New Yorker*, William Finnegan

“The Trials of Alice Goffman” *The New York Times Magazine*, Gideon Lewis Kraus

“Nothing to Envy” Barbara Demick, pt. 1

Session 4: February 19

The other as a place

We will begin by hearing students read their first-person oral histories aloud. Everyone will read at least one of the short assignments in class: half will read this week, half will read the essay on place that will be assigned this week. (Students themselves will choose to read now or later, but everyone will read once: not zero, not twice. Once!) Then we will discuss the week’s readings: descriptions of place that, in various ways and contexts, represent a foreign or unfamiliar setting for the writer. How do these writers engage with their surroundings? What do they notice? What do they miss? Do you feel like you “get” how the place works and functions, do you sense its sights and smells? Finally, we will discuss your next assignment: a short reported essay of 800-1000 words in which you visit and spend time in a place that represents or relates to your own personal sense of the “other.”

Readings:

“The Magic Mountain,” *Harper’s*, Matthew Power,

“Our Town,” *The New Yorker*, Larissa MacFarquhar

“Slouching Toward Bethlehem” and “Marrying Absurd,” Joan Didion

Session 5: February 26

People unlike myself: the other at home

This week we are reading articles in which the writer deeply embedded with a person or set of characters living vastly different lives than his or her own, and produced a work of penetrating journalism as a result. All these texts are set in various parts of the United States, at different times and with disparate

communities; the hope is that by encountering people whose lives are made up of very different concerns and priorities than our own, we might gain a better sense of the world they inhabit—for those in the U.S. (that means your instructor!) a life that exists right under our noses, but is often out of sight. Do these texts create a sense of empathy or connection? How might they be different if they were, for example, first person memoirs written by members of these communities? As ever, we're interested in the role, gaze, and attention of the outsider, and what is gained and lost in their role as reporter and narrator. We'll also spend a moment and discuss your work-in-progress assignments on place.

Readings:

“Out There Part II,” *The New Yorker*, William Finnegan

“Invisible Child,” *The New York Times*, Andrea Elliot

“The Marriage Cure,” *The New Yorker*, Katherine Boo

Session 6: March 4

The other abroad

Students will begin this week by reading aloud their reported essays on place. The half of class that did not read two weeks ago will read this week; those who did read previously will not. We'll have a chance to discuss how this experience went for everyone: did you feel comfortable? Uncomfortable? How much time was required to begin to feel like you understood your chosen settings? Then we'll discuss this week's theme: individuals and communities of “other” that are foreign by definition and everything is unfamiliar, from custom and culture to geography. In an way, this is the clearest or most obvious way to encounter the other: go somewhere faraway and meet people unlike yourself.

“Nothing to Envy,” Barbara Demick, pt. 2

“The Grand Tour,” *The New Yorker*, Evan Osnos

“Learning to Speak Lingerie,” *The New Yorker*, Peter Hessler

Session 7: March 11

When the other is familiar

This week we will be joined by Elena Kostyuchenko, one of the most well-known Russian journalists working today. She has made a career reporting on marginalized, outsider communities in Russia, giving voice and humanity to people and places usually far from the attention of readers inside Russia, let alone abroad. Kostyuchenko is at once at outside and insider—a stranger to many of the places where she has reported, but considers herself to share a

common fate and homeland with her subjects. We will have the chance to hear from and ask questions of a true modern master of non-fiction reportage.

Readings:

“A Russian Journalist's Pained Love for Her Country,” *The New Yorker*, Joshua Yaffa

Selected chapters from “I Love Russia,” Elena Kostyuchenko

Session 8: March 18

Your personal other: pitch session

This week’s class will function as a pitch session for the final project of the semester: a reported essay from inside an “other” community of your choosing in Berlin. For this assignment, you will spend a considerable amount of time (not one or two hours, but not weeks, either) embedding with an individual or group of individuals who represent a foreign, unfamiliar, strange, “other” world. You will write an essay of the type we have been reading this semester. During this class, we will pitch and workshop our ideas for this assignment, before setting off the next weeks to embark on the reporting.

Readings:

“Nothing to Envy,” Barbara Demick, pt. 3

“Beyond the Beautiful Forever,” Katherine Boo, pt 1

Session 9: April 1

When the familiar becomes unfamiliar (or vice versa)

Often the other is far closer than we realize. Sometimes that can be a function of geography (we don’t imagine who or what is on the other side of the fence) and other times of imagination (a foreign land or people have more in common with us than we realize). We’ll start with a discussion of what that might mean for our own lives and who or what these proximate “others” might be for us, and then we’ll turn to the readings, which highlight exactly this dynamic: what happens when we look for the other among what we already know?

Readings:

“Monuments to the Unthinkable,” *The Atlantic*, Clint Smith

“A Day in the Life of Abed Salama,” *New York Review of Books*, Nathan Thrall

“Beyond the Beautiful Forever,” Katherine Boo, pt. 2

Session 10: April 8

Immersing yourself with the other

There's no simple way around it: in order to understand the other and relay this knowledge in writing, you often have to go deep, very deep, in embedding yourself in a foreign community or subculture. This approach potentially contains rich rewards, but also contains dangers and pitfalls. It's not easy to give up your time and in some cases sense of self to immerse yourself in an unfamiliar world. Are the payoffs worth it? At what cost? This week we will discuss the lengths some reporters go to penetrate the worlds of the other, and whether we think such an approach is feasible, desirable, and worthwhile.

Readings:

“Beyond the Beautiful Forever,” Katherine Boo, pt. 3

“My Four Months as Private Prison Guard,” *Mother Jones*, Shane Bauer

“All Due Respect,” *The New Yorker*, Peter Hessler

Session 11: April 15

Guest speaker and readings TBD

We will be joined by a guest who has reported and written on the other—this week will be finalized later in the semester and readings announced well ahead of time.

Session 12: April 22

Newsroom visit

We'll visit the editorial offices of a major media publication in Berlin, to speak with writers and editors about how they approach their own work telling the stories of “other” communities and individuals. Students will have a chance to hear a diversity of opinions and strategies as how varying journalistic professionals conceptualize and carry out this task. There will be plenty of time for questions and dialogue. Students will also be expected to explain, and get feedback, on their in-process final projects for class.

Session 13: April 29

Case study in making the other your own: your instructor's story

As it happens, the instructor for this course has made a career of reporting on a region entirely foreign and unfamiliar to him—at least that was the case at first. For more than a decade, your instructor has covered Russia and Ukraine, two countries to which he has no familial or personal ties, did not grow up speaking their languages, and only began to visit as an adult. During this session, hopefully held at either a Russian or Ukrainian restaurant in Berlin, we'll have a chance to discuss (informally but productively!) his career trajectory and own path toward reporting the other. This will also be a chance for us all to discuss

your progress with the final projects. Particular readings will be assigned closer to the date.

Session 14: May 6

Works in progress

The exact composition of this class, the last in the semester, will be decided later in the term, depending on everyone's progress in reporting and writing the final assignment. We'll certainly discuss how your projects are coming along and what questions and problems you might be facing. It's also possible this class will switch with the one prior. More as the semester unfolds.

Note: FINAL ASSIGNMENTS DUE BY 5PM WEDNESDAY MAY 15