ENGL 55.xx: Socio/Poetics: Cultural Inquiry in the 20th and 21st centuries

Fall 2021

Instructor: Ingrid Becker

This course introduces students to a cultural history of the relationship between Sociology and Literature in America from the early twentieth century to the present. Taking inspiration from recent scholarly approaches to literary interpretation that draw on sociological methods for interpreting texts quantitatively, relationally, and descriptively, we will also examine the ways in which sociology has long been occupied by phenomena often associated with literature: subjectivity, uncertainty, and linguistic form. Beginning with the institutionalization of sociology in the 1920s and 1930s, we will explore aesthetic texts alongside sociological works and other cultural documents. In doing so we will situate ourselves in a historical milieu and reconsider conventional literary categories and lineages such as documentary and docupoetry, the photo-essay, and New Journalism through the lens of their response to and use of sociological methods and tropes.

For instance, we will think through the stakes of expressing interiority and representing social trends through thick descriptions, testimonies, autobiographies, photographs, and statistical facts. We will ask such questions as: how can one re-write or re-envision a piece of data without reducing the felt experience it purports to describe? How can the re-mediation of “social facts” through literary conventions, authorial subjectivities, and readerly communities reconfigure our concepts of aesthetic meaning and the value of the “humanities” themselves in an increasingly scientistic age? How do we understand social mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in relation to individual agency and self-understanding? Throughout, we will think about how texts at the intersection of literature and sociology have attempted to both describe and offer solutions to social problems like economic inequality, racialization, gender discrimination, and criminality.

**Course Objectives**

Over the course of the quarter, students will:

* Develop an understanding of literary critical and sociological concepts and methods
* Become familiar with 20th century literary genres that resonate with sociological approaches to the world
* Practice interdisciplinary thinking
* Advance skills in textual analysis, scholarly discussion, and academic writing

**Assessment and Grading**

Student performance will be assessed based on the following rubric, each aspect of which is articulated in more detail below:

Attendance and Participation: 10%

Hypothesis Annotations: 15%

Short Paper 1 (analysis of literary text): 20%

Short Paper 2 (analysis of sociological text): 20%

Final Project: 35%

**Attendance and Participation (Remote version)**

Active participation in our class during synchronous Zoom meetings is mandatory and essential for a productive discussion-based seminar, especially one conducted remotely! You are allowed **one** **absence** for illness and unavoidable conflicts with attendance, no explanation needed. Further unexcused absences (unless accompanied by a note from a health professional or equivalent) and/or frequent episodes of lateness will negatively impact your grade. **Please advise me in advance if you cannot attend a Zoom class**—communication is key, especially given the delicate situations that may arise during remote learning and the Covid-19 pandemic. I value your honesty and will take into account each individual’s circumstances should a problem with attendance arise.

Across all aspects of participation, be prepared to offer observations about the readings, raise questions about them, and dialogue with your peers. A strong participation grade turns on the quality rather than the quantity of your engagement. This means you must read closely and carefully, take notes, point us to specific passages that you find striking, important, or confusing, and reflect on and engage with the contributions of other students. We are exploring challenging texts and complex ideas in a historical moment that is highly challenging and complex in different ways for each of us—so treat contradictions, tensions, and moments of individual or collective puzzlement as great places to start our conversations.

I recognize that everyone has different levels of comfort with speaking on Zoom, different access to internet and technology, and different time zone availability, and I am committed to facilitating the success of all students. Please let me know via email if you foresee any difficulties with your participation in the class that is not addressed and we will discuss strategies to join the conversation.

**Annotations**

Beginning in Week 2, asynchronous work will consist of annotating each Thursday’s reading with Hypothesis. Readings can be accessed through “Modules” on Canvas. For each reading, you’re expected to **offer at least two annotations** (observations, questions, speculations, connections to other texts) and **one response to the annotation of a peer**. Annotations are **due by 5 pm each Wednesday.** A video-demonstration for using Hypothesis and making effective annotations will be made available in the main class folder on Canvas.

(TBD – major assignment descriptions, policies & expectations)

**Course Schedule (on the model of two sessions per week)**

Disciplinary Formations and Experiments

Week 1:

James English, “New Sociologies of Literature” (2010)  
Rita Felski, “My Sociology Envy” (2019), “Context Stinks!” (2011)

Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction” (2009)

I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism* (1929), selections

Week 2:

Émile Durkheim, “What is a Social Fact” (1895) in *The Rules of Sociological Method*

W.E.B. Du Bois, “Sociology Hesitant” (1902)

C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (1955), selections

Andrew Abbott, “Against Narrative: A Preface to Lyrical Sociology,” *Sociological Theory* 25, no. 1 (2007): 67–99.

Description and Representation

Week 3:

Robert and Helen Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (1929) & *Middletown in Transition* (1937), selections

C. Wright Mills, “Sociological Poetry (1938)

James and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families* (1941), selections

Week 4:

Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Behind the Veil* (1920), selections

Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (1941); Preface to *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945)

Numbers and Norms

Week 5:

Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (1990), selections

Gerd Gigerenzer et al., *The Empire of Chance: How Probability Changed Science and Everyday Life* (1989), selections

Langston Hughes, “Johannesburg Mines” (1928)

Evie Shockley, “statistical haiku (or, how do they discount us? let me count the ways” (2011)

Richard Wright, *Haiku: The Last Poems of an American Icon* (2012), selections

Week 6:

W. H. Auden, “The Unknown Citizen” (1940)

Sylvia Plath, “The Applicant” (1963)

David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (1950), selections

Thomas Wolfe, T*he Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (1965), selections

Week 7:

Erving Goffman, “On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction (1955)

Howard Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (1963), selections

Wolfe, ctd.

Asking and Answering

Week 8:

George Gallop, “A Scientific Method for Determining Reader-Interest” (1930)

Hadley Cantril, *Gauging Public Opinion* (1944), “The Meaning of Questions” and “The Wording of Questions”

Betty Friedan, “If One Generation Can Ever Tell Another: A Woman Is a Person Too” (1961)

John Ashbery, “Proust Questionnaire” (1982)

Ron Silliman “Sunset Debris” (1986)

Allen Ginsberg, “Multiple Identity Questionnaire” (1996)

Week 9:

Bhanu Kapil, *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers* (2001)

Monica Prendergast et al., *Poetic Inquiry: Vibrant Voices in the Social Sciences*, “‘Poem is What?’ Poetic Inquiry in Qualitative Social Science Research” (2009) and select poems(selections)

Summing it all up: Hybrid Modes of Cultural Inquiry

Week 10:

C. D. Wright, *One Big Self: An Investigation* (2003)

Reflections on course

**Dartmouth’s Academic Honor Principle**

The faculty, administration, and students of Dartmouth College recognize the Academic Honor Principle as fundamental to the education process. Any instance of academic dishonesty is considered a violation of the Academic Honor Principle.

Fundamental to the principle of independent learning are the requirements of honesty and integrity in the performance of academic assignments, both in and out of the classroom. Dartmouth operates on the principle of academic honor, without proctoring of examinations. Any student who submits work which is not his or her own, or commits other acts of academic dishonesty, violates the purposes of the college and is subject to disciplinary actions, up to and including suspension or separation.

The Academic Honor Principle depends on the willingness of students, individually and collectively, to maintain and perpetuate standards of academic honesty. Each Dartmouth student accepts the responsibility to be honorable in the student's own academic affairs, as well as to support the Principle as it applies to others.

Any student who becomes aware of a violation of the Academic Honor Principle is bound by honor to report the violation to an appropriate authority, such as an instructor, department or program chair, academic dean, or the Office of Community Standards & Accountability. If Dartmouth students stand by and do nothing, both the spirit and operation of the Academic Honor Principle are severely threatened.

A number of actions are specifically prohibited by the Academic Honor Principle. These focus on plagiarism and on academic dishonesty in the taking of examinations, the writing of papers, the use of the same work in more than one course, and unauthorized collaboration.

You are responsible for understanding and complying with the Dartmouth Academic Honor Principle and can find more information on the [Academic Honor Principle webpage.](https://students.dartmouth.edu/community-standards/policy/academic-honor-principle)

**Religious Observances**

Some students may wish to take part in religious observances that occur during this academic term. If you have a religious observance that conflicts with your participation in the course, please meet with me before the end of the second week of the term to discuss appropriate accommodations.

**Student Accessibility and Accommodations**

Students requesting disability-related accommodations and services for this course are encouraged to schedule a phone/Zoom meeting with me as early in the term as possible. This conversation will help to establish what supports are built into my course. In order for accommodations to be authorized, students are required to consult with Student Accessibility Services (SAS; [Getting Started with SAS webpage](https://students.dartmouth.edu/student-accessibility/students/working-sas/getting-started); [student.accessibility.services@dartmouth.edu](mailto:student.accessibility.services@dartmouth.edu); 603-646-9900) and to request an accommodation email be sent to me. We will then work together with SAS if accommodations need to be modified based on the learning environment. If students have questions about whether they are eligible for accommodations, they should contact the SAS office. All inquiries and discussions will remain confidential.

**Mental Health and Wellness**

The academic environment at Dartmouth is challenging, our terms are intensive, and classes are not the only demanding part of your life. There are a number of resources available to you on campus to support your wellness, including your undergraduate dean (<https://students.dartmouth.edu/undergraduate-deans/>), Counseling and Human Development (<https://students.dartmouth.edu/health-service/counseling/about>), and the Student Wellness Center (<https://students.dartmouth.edu/wellness-center/>). I encourage you to use these resources to take care of yourself throughout the term, and to come speak to me if you experience any difficulties.

**Title IX**

At Dartmouth, we value integrity, responsibility, and respect for the rights and interests of others, all central to our Principles of Community. We are dedicated to establishing and maintaining a safe and inclusive campus where all have equal access to the educational and employment opportunities Dartmouth offers. We strive to promote an environment of sexual respect, safety, and well-being. In its policies and standards, Dartmouth demonstrates unequivocally that sexual assault, gender-based harassment, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking are not tolerated in our community.

The Sexual Respect Website (<https://sexual-respect.dartmouth.edu>) at Dartmouth provides a wealth of information on your rights with regard to sexual respect and resources that are available to all in our community.

Please note that, as a faculty member, I am obligated to share disclosures regarding conduct under Title IX with Dartmouth's Title IX Coordinator. Confidential resources are also available, and include licensed medical or counseling professionals (e.g., a licensed psychologist), staff members of organizations recognized as rape crisis centers under state law (such as WISE), and ordained clergy (see <https://dartgo.org/titleix_resources>).

Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact Dartmouth's Title IX Coordinator or the Deputy Title IX Coordinator for the Guarini School. Their contact information can be found on the sexual respect website at: <https://sexual-respect.dartmouth.edu>.

**Financial Difficulty**

If you encounter financial challenges related to this class, please let me know.

**RWIT**

The Student Center for Research, Writing and Information Technology (RWIT) is a free service dedicated to helping members of the Dartmouth community develop more effective strategies for generating and organizing their ideas, finding and evaluating research sources, and presenting and revising compositions in a variety of media. Through informal dialogue, RWIT tutors assist writers in developing better compositions and more effective composing strategies. Students may schedule an appointment with a RWIT tutor by going to: <https://rwit.dartmouth.edu/>. Tutors hold regular hours each Sunday through Thursday and you will be able to send your tutor a document upon scheduling an appointment.