

## ENGL 120W: HIV/AIDS Narratives from New York

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Office hour: W 12:15-1:15, KP 354

ENGL 120W: Fall 2010  
M/W 1:40-2:55 PM  
Classroom: KY/326

### Course Description

In *How to Have Theory in An Epidemic*, Paula Treichler wrote that "in multiple, fragmentary, and often contradictory ways, we struggle to achieve some sort of understanding of AIDS, a reality that is frightening, widely publicized, yet finally neither directly or fully knowable. AIDS is no different in this respect from other linguistic constructions that, in the commonplace view of language, are thought to transmit pre-existing ideas and represent real-world entities yet in fact do neither" (11). By studying a mixture of fiction, first person accounts, critical essays, and other texts, we will explore what Treichler meant when she claimed that we construct images of HIV/AIDS through language instead of conveying the unadulterated reality of HIV/AIDS. Acknowledging how the stories we tell about HIV and AIDS create a certain "reality" in our minds will strengthen our awareness of how our own writing functions in the public sphere.

We will use the readings and our responses as a chance to question our ideas about HIV, question how other people think about HIV, and to remember the current and historical presence of HIV/AIDS in our city. This class seeks to reveal the work writers do to characterize political, social, and medical issues and to use that understanding to write thoughtful analysis of the depictions of HIV/AIDS that we will study in class.

### Course Objectives

Through the readings, class discussions, and written work, students will

- 1) learn to recognize some common narratives told about HIV/AIDS
- 2) understand the role of HIV/AIDS narratives in shaping society's beliefs about HIV and AIDS in a way local to New York
- 3) demonstrate an ability to create written arguments that show a thoughtful engagement with the texts and subjects under consideration
- 4) improve their understanding of how to write research papers and conduct close readings

### Required Texts

Most of the readings for this class will be available through Blackboard. However, students need to have copies of *Push* by Sapphire, *Notorious H.I.V.: The Media*

*Spectacle of Nushawn Williams* by Thomas Shevory, and *People in Trouble* by Sarah Schulman. These will be available at the school bookstore.

## Essay Topics

Essay #1 (4-5 pages): Write about an interaction you had with a narrative about HIV/AIDS. This could include participation in a school assembly, a morning at the AIDS Walk, reading a newspaper article, or something that a kid once said to you on the playground. This interaction could be quite personal, so please do not feel obligated to reveal anything that would pain you. While considering the interaction you chose, think about the story it conveyed about HIV/AIDS. What "reality" did it present? What conclusions did you draw from this interaction? Do you feel the same way now that you have completed some of the readings for this class? Use specific examples from the readings to make this last point.

Essay #2 (5-6 pages): So far we have examined novels, first person *testimonio*, short stories, media analysis, and other kinds of essays. How much difference does form and genre make in the presentation of stories about HIV/AIDS? Pick two of the readings to consider in comparison.

Some particularly fruitful comparisons might include the depictions of

- 1) Juanito Xtravaganza vs. Precious Jones, especially on points of literacy and access
- 2) Raheim Rivers and Angel Lopez (characters from "urban" fiction/romance) vs. Gloria Bronski and Amelio (characters from "literary" fiction)
- 3) Tom from *What I Did Wrong* vs. Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé, especially considering how both deal with their need to write or talk about people they knew/know
- 4) Marvelyn Brown vs. Nushawn Williams, with reference to the differences between first person testimony and being the subject of analysis

Please talk to me (in person or through email) if you wish to choose your own set of comparisons.

Essay #3 (6-7 pages): You have two choices.

- 1) A major plot point in *People in Trouble* involves the founding of Justice, an organization of AIDS activists whose depiction invokes the real-life AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP)/NY. Spend some time looking around the online ACT UP Oral History Project (<http://www.actuporalhistory.org/>) and/or visiting the ACT UP/NY archive at the Manhattan NYPL research branch on 5th Ave & 42nd St. How does the depiction of Justice differ from or complement the presentation of ACT UP/NY in attempts to preserve its work for history? I am less interested in "inaccuracies" -- after all, Justice is fictive and should not be expected to exactly mirror ACT UP/NY -- than I

am in the broader depiction of the "reality" of AIDS activism as expressed through historical archives and a novel written around the same time that activists founded ACT UP/NY.

2) As its title suggests, *Notorious H.I.V.: The Media Spectacle of Nushawn Williams* builds an argument about how the case of Nushawn Williams triggered a media spectacle that contained encoded messages about how our society thinks about HIV/AIDS. In order to examine Shevory's claims, find at least two newspaper articles, television shows, or other media sources about Williams that Shevory did not discuss with depth. Analyze the narratives these sources contain, and consider them in reference to Shevory's arguments about Williams as a media spectacle. The two sources you pick must be long enough to provide enough food for thought to sustain a 6-7 page essay.

## **Grading**

25%: Class participation. Class participation demands that students thoughtfully respond to readings and their classmates in discussion, ask questions, and otherwise demonstrate their engagement with the class. It will also incorporate online discussion through Blackboard, which we will discuss more in class.

20%: In-class writings. Throughout the class, we will be engaging in short in-class writing exercises. These will range from informal reactions to the readings to workshops calculated to help you develop your essay ideas. Please always come to class prepared to write.

30%: First two essays. While the first two essays assignments are individually important, students should also see them as learning opportunities that can be applied towards the final paper.

25%: The final paper.

**Grading Criteria** (by Professor Jason Tougaw, Queens College, Dept. of English)  
When I evaluate your formal assignments, I am looking for inventive ideas expressed in engaging prose. Your writing should both please and enlighten readers and give them a sense of why your project is important—why what you have to say needs to be said. I evaluate the words on the page, rather than potential, improvement, or effort. The work you put into an assignment will most certainly be evident in the completed essay. The grading criteria below reflect the general standards to which I hold essays. Pluses and minuses represent shades of difference. However, no description can capture the full range of elements that make a piece of writing strong (or weak). My feedback on your writing will give you both more concrete and more thorough explanations of the standards by which I evaluate it.

An “A” range essay is both ambitious and successful. It presents and develops focused and compelling set of ideas with grace, confidence, and control. It integrates and responds to sources subtly and persuasively.

A “B” range essay is one that is ambitious but only partially successful, or one that achieves modest aims well. A “B” essay must contain focused ideas, but these ideas may not be particularly complex, or may not be presented or supported well at every point. It integrates sources efficiently, if not always gracefully.

A “C” range essay has significant problems articulating and presenting its central ideas, though it is usually focused and coherent. Such essays often lack clarity and use source material in simple ways, without significant analysis or insight.

A “D” range essay fails to grapple seriously with either ideas or texts, or fails to address the expectations of the assignment. A “D” essay distinguishes itself from a failing essay by showing moments of promise, such as emerging, though not sufficiently developed or articulated ideas. “D” essays do not use sources well, though there may some effort to do so.

An “F” essay does not grapple with either ideas or texts, or does not address the expectations of the assignment. It is often unfocused or incoherent.

**Writing Center:** Located in Kiely Hall 229, tutors there are trained to help you revise your writing at various stages. If you believe you need additional help with your writing, or if I ask you to set up a regular meeting with a tutor, you should make an appointment at least one week prior to when an assignment is due. You can also get online help by visiting their website at <http://qcpages.qc.edu/qcsw>.

**Note About Special Accommodation :** If you have a learning, sensory, or physical reason for special accommodation in this class, contact the Office of Special Services in 171 Kiely Hall at 718-997-5870 and please inform me.

## **Plagiarism**

Plagiarism involves passing off someone else's work as your own. You will fail any assignments in which you plagiarize, so please make sure to ask if you have any doubts about what constitutes plagiarism.

## **A Note on Classroom Behavior**

While you are expected to always treat your classmates with respect and recognize their human dignity, it is important to realize that all of us come to this class with different experiences -- of HIV/AIDS and in general -- that make these behavior requirements paramount in this class. In light of this realization, I ask that students comport themselves with thoughtfulness when addressing subjects raised by the readings.

## **Class Schedule**

8/30: Introduction

### **What We Talk About When We Talk About HIV: Then and Now**

9/1: Triechler. "Epilogue" from *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic*

9/6: NO CLASS

9/8: Crimp. "Portraits of People with AIDS"

Towner. "The Changing Face of HIV Infection"

9/13: Weir. Excerpt from *What I Did Wrong*

### **Speaking Truth to Power: *Testimonio*/Testimony, Literacy, and Being Heard**

9/15: Cruz-Malavé & Rivera. Excerpt from *Queer Latino Testimonio, Keith Haring, and Juanito Xtravaganza: Hard Tails*

9/20: Murphy. "Testimony"

9/22: Sapphire. *Push*

9/27: Sapphire. *Push*

9/29: Brown. Excerpt from *The Naked Truth: Young, Beautiful, and (HIV) Positive*

10/4: FIRST PAPER DUE

In class: clips from *Precious*

10/11: NO CLASS

### **Moral Panics: Monsters, Sluts, and Downlow Liars**

10/13: Watney. "Moral Panics."

10/18: Shevory. *Notorious H.I.V.: The Media Spectacle of Nushawn Williams*

10/20: Shevory. *Notorious H.I.V.: The Media Spectacle of Nushawn Williams*

10/25: Shevory. *Notorious H.I.V.: The Media Spectacle of Nushawn Williams*

10/27: Carter. "Ask Amelio" from *Glory Goes and Gets Some*

Hardy. Excerpts from *The Day Eazy-E Died*

11/1: SECOND PAPER DUE

In class: "The Monster," "The ADS Epidemic"

11/3: NO CLASS

### **Who Controls Narratives?: Activism, Media, and the Powers that Be**

11/8: Crimp. "Right On, Girlfriend!"

Gossett. "On Kiyoshi Kuromiya's Legacy"

<http://aidsandsocialjustice.wordpress.com/2010/06/13/che-gossett-on-aids-activist-kiyoshi-kuromiyas-legacy-and-the-intersections-between-all-movements-for-liberation/>

11/10: Muñoz. "Pedro Zamora's Real World of Counterpublicity"

11/15: Schulman. *People in Trouble*

11/17: Schulman. *People in Trouble*

11/22: Schulman. *People in Trouble*

11/24: Chambré. "HIV Stops with Me" and "The Politics of Disease."

12/1: V/A. *America Is Dying Slowly*

12/6: Quiñónez. Excerpt from *Chango's Fire*

12/8: In class review / no new reading due

12/13: LAST CLASS / review

FINAL PAPERS DUE TBA

Note: I reserve the right to alter this syllabus as need be.

