

# Portfolio Exam

*Due by 9:00AM on August 13, 2018 emailed as one continuous PDF (including cover sheet) to [nsilverman@gc.cuny.edu](mailto:nsilverman@gc.cuny.edu). Exams received after 9:00AM on August 13 and/or not sent as one continuous PDF will receive a grade of Fail.*

**Student Number:**

**This exam includes:**

Framing Essay (2000 words total)

Including:

Intellectual Autobiography (1000 words)

Reflections on the Portfolio Exam (1000 words)

Conference Paper (10 double spaced pages + works cited)

Including:

Conference Call for Papers

Abstract (200 words)

**Plus two of the following three parts:**

Review Essay (12-15 double spaced pages)

Annotated Bibliography

Including:

15 Entries

1500 word Rationale

Syllabus (5-8 double spaced pages in total)

including:

Teaching Statement (1-2 pages)

Syllabus (3-4 pages)

Analytical Explanation (2-3 pages)

**This exam fulfills the comprehensive stipulations in the following ways (texts may be repeated):**

1. Three different centuries:
  - a. Text: Part:
  - b. Text: Part:
  - c. Text: Part:
2. One Pre-1800 text & One Post-1800 text:
  - a. Text: Part:
  - b. Text: Part:
3. Two different national traditions:
  - a. Text: Part:
  - b. Text: Part:

### **Intellectual Autobiography: Concretizing My Middle-Distant Future**

Something I did anticipate: how the forecast of my dissertation would change and become more definite. My first year of doctoral study has greatly reshaped my interests, which differ—but not beyond recognition—from those I outlined in my application materials nearly two years ago.

Something I didn't anticipate: how much this city and its goings-on would direct my scholarly interests, which are more than ever integrated into my daily life. Much of the change in these interests can be traced to events that ran directly parallel to the critical theory certificate's gut requirement survey course I took last fall with John Brenkman. There are two orthogonal interests that interact with this class's timeline. Both of these intersections point toward my future work at this vantage point, so it's worth slowing down to tease them out.

On a Wednesday evening in early October, I went to a talk by Heather Mac Donald at the Penn Club. Sponsored by the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think-tank, this lecture was teased as a look into Mac Donald's "personal experiences from the front lines of today's campus culture wars." It was, I assume, an outgrowth of her latest forthcoming book project, *The Diversity Delusion: How Race and Gender Pandering Corrupt the University and Undermine Our Culture*. Deriding the High Church of French Theory Broadly Writ, Mac Donald's argument damned much of the work that goes on in English and Comparative Literature departments every day: too detached from reality, and too distant from the "proper purview" of the humanities to be useful, these studies, Mac Donald argued, ought to be derided for their uselessness and denied funding. This was a scary lecture, if only because it grossly misunderstood—or misrepresented—what exactly goes on in an English classroom.

But such a distorted characterization, however, was not as far off the mark as I'd hoped it might be: just weeks after this lecture, Brenkman's course covered a chapter from Brian Massumi's *Parables for the Virtual*, which leans somewhat heavily on Massumi's (mis)interpretations of the work of Benjamin Libet, whose 1980s and 1990s experiments claim to have demonstrated a "backward referral in time" that apparently calls into question free will and human agency. At the same time, I was enrolled in a philosophy course with David Rosenthal on perception; we covered Libet's experiments directly. These two disciplines' discussions around Libet thus constituted rich material for my final paper: whereas analytic philosophers such as Patricia Churchland and Daniel Dennett had for some time contested the viability of Libet's methods and findings, Massumi's invocation of Libet neglected this long history of controversy, mangling nearly beyond recognition not just Libet's experiments but also the implications of his conclusions. Massumi's work was, in other words, a perfect example of the kind of bad or useless scholarship Mac Donald and others like her are quick to dismiss. I wrote my final paper for Brenkman's class on Massumi's (mis)use of Libet, and on how such (mis- and ab)uses demean scholarship by legitimating Mac Donald-style attacks against the humanities.

The second stream came later in the semester, and concretized three other rather disparate experiences I'd had over the last year. Shortly after I submitted my applications to Ph.D. programs, I came across Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, a book that has affected my interests profoundly. Firmly installed in my mind, this book ran parallel to two other works I viewed in October and November: I watched *mother!* with great interest, and I eagerly attended the Met's production of *Exterminating Angel*, an adaptation of a surrealist 1962 Luis Buñuel film of the same name. In retrospect, these three works fit together rather nicely: each deals with houses and with the limits and boundaries of such (domestic) spaces. My background in Maurice

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology had whetted my interests enough that when my class with Brenkman arrived at some (mercifully brief!) works by Peter Sloterdijk, a possible dissertation settled more clearly into focus. At the center would be these three works, and at the edges the long history of phenomenology, broadly conceived, including Sloterdijk, on whom I'm now hooked.<sup>1</sup>

That's about all I have at this point, dissertation-wise. That's not to say, however, I'm without a plan.

This summer, I've been working on two medium-term projects, both of which grow out of the past year's coursework, and both of which speak to what I think are real gaps in two critical literatures. With an eye towards publication, I've been revising a paper on David Foster Wallace's reputation as a misogynist's misogynist. What are the ethical implications of reading—and enjoying—Wallace as a woman when, as he insists in a 1996 *Elle* magazine interview, his “ideal reader” is a Melanie Griffith look-a-like whom he's successfully “seduce[d]” into tending to his “physical and emotional” needs? Adapted from my final seminar paper from Robert Reid-Pharr's spring 2018 course on celebrity culture and titled “David Foster Wallace, Exemplary Chauvinist Pig,” this paper puts me firmly in touch with the millennial bratpack fiction—to whom, perhaps, Danielewski is a close cousin—with which I started two years ago in my writing sample, and which will (likely) comprise a goodly part of one of my orals lists.

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<sup>1</sup> Over the Thanksgiving break, I read *Bubbles*, the first volume of his *Spheres* trilogy; during the January intersession, I read *Globes*, the second volume, and Sloterdijk's early 1983 work, *Critique of Cynical Reason*. I'm currently at work on *Foams*, the final work in the *Spheres* trilogy.

The other builds on the Libet project I mentioned above. Titled “Stop Citing Benjamin Libet,” this project launches what will be—above all—a disciplinary argument. Whereas there’s still some skepticism surrounding his work’s methodologies and conclusions in philosophy of mind, affect studies relies heavily on his work to speculate towards certain conclusions that, in my view, are tenuous at best—and, at worst, demeaning to the very kinds of inquiry they aim to practice. To be sure, this is a rather more nebulous project, perhaps better suited for a monograph or (!) dissertation-length study. Regardless, it’s something that needs to be written, even if only to fill a rather neglectfully large gap in the scholarly archive. Whereas the Wallace project I’ve outlined above is basically ready for submission, this Libet project is in a middle-nascent stage.

My present interests are at once clearer and more distant than those I had coming into this program. And they are, to be sure, rather scattered. The range of courses I’ve taken thus far reflects a kind of interdisciplinary scholarly indecision that is not, in my view, totally unproductive. The tangibles of my middle-distant future—revising and submitting this Wallace paper for publication in a middle-tier journal suitable for a scholarly articular debut; reading writing more about Libet, if only to get a better sense of the outline of such a project—are thus concrete. And I’m trying as best I can to make that as-yet foggy and theoretical view of my far-side-of-the-middle-distant dissertating future as concrete as possible by taking a survey course on phenomenology this fall and by reading as much of Sloterdijk and his predecessors as I can.

**Reflections on the Portfolio Examination: Forecasting *The Interdiscipline***

I want to write two books when I grow up. One of the projects—speculatively titled, *The Interdiscipline*, and taking primary inspiration from Latour's *Laboratory Life*, this work would examine forms of interdisciplinary work, from strategy consulting to dog breeding, and how disparate kinds of laborers might talk about their work more similarly than might at first be expected—is clear in my mind; the other is hazier, less definite. Neither grows directly out of the work I've just outlined.

Archers are encouraged not to aim at the center of a target but to aim beyond it, and in so aiming beyond, the target will be reached in the arrow's passage through it towards its ultimate envisaged aim. This is taught as a more reliable method for hitting the target than aiming for the bullseye. This aiming-beyond is how I'm approaching the work of what I hope will be a long career in scholarship. My dissertation is a necessary challenge, one that will demand serious effort and deep study. But I'm aiming beyond it; it is not the true object of my gaze.

At this vantage point, I'm looking towards the more definite project of the towards which I've just gestured. The apparent disparity of the materials this portfolio assembles disappears in long light of this project's focus, which is also its provisional title: *The Interdiscipline*. What follows will rehearse the origins and methods of this portfolio's component parts in light of this future monograph, which I've mentioned only to render some coherence to this dossier's disparate elements.

Written for the August 2018 meeting of the North American Levinas Society after I took John Brenkman's course on Nietzsche, Levinas, and Blanchot, the conference paper I've included attempts to tie down the heavy theoretics of my first year as a graduate student to tangible lived practice. The essay is wide-ranging but has a clear focus: I've tried surgically to concentrate on

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the consequences of an everyday occurrence Levinas seems to have overlooked: hearing sounds we don't understand or can't place. So-called "sound studies" is hot right now, and though this paper treats the question of sounds in Levinas' ethical framework, it does not respond immediately to the principles of this emergent interdiscipline. To be sure, a paper on Levinas might not fit well within the English department. (Fittingly to the authors it studied, Brenkman's course was a Comparative Literature offering.) But the conference's boutique yet pressing theme—growing out of host Western Carolina University's Cherokee Center and Cherokee Studies program—offered a prime occasion to render Levinas' sometime opacity clear and relevant.

America is a postcolonial nation in two respects. 1776's middle finger to King George inaugurated a slew of independence movements across the British Empire's global range. America's postcolonial history, however, begins more properly nearly 250 years prior to George Washington's birth with the history of enslavement, displacement, slaughter, and oppression of indigenous populations—a history of oppression that continues to this day. Even if its treatment of these violences is oblique, this paper's attention to America's postcolonial histories demonstrates an attention I, as a budding Americanist, ought to pay. Prior to Brenkman's course, I hadn't heard of Levinas, hadn't written anything that might qualify as "sound studies," and hadn't ever written any serious consideration of indigeneity or American postcolonialisms; this paper thus represents a serious and substantial attempt to branch out my scholarly interests.

However personally groundbreaking the conference paper was for me, the mock syllabus I've included here feels more experimental—and closer to home. Despite the fact that this was the first year of a Ph.D. program in English, I've done very little reading of actual "literature" in my first year as a graduate student. As such, this syllabus might represent the most tenuous or

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reaching component of these materials. It is, in other words, the genre I feel least prepared to teach if class were to start next week. In other ways, however, its terrain feels comfortably familiar. I first fell in love with close reading—and got the hang of it—in a Milton class my sophomore year of college. I there encountered “Lycidas,” which remains fixedly in second place on my All-Time Favorite Works Across All Genres list; the John Berryman story, “Wash Far Away,” has always been associated with it in my mind.

As I brainstormed for this component of my portfolio, it occurred to me that Berryman’s story—on teaching “Lycidas”—is both a how-to guide and a useful retelling of Milton’s homage. Then it clicked: what if there were a class studying twentieth-century authorship by reading the ways authors have reread their predecessors? The inspiration for such a course would be more Jorge Luis Borges than Harold Bloom, though texts by both appear on the syllabus. Constructing it was an exercise in approaching a familiar form by unfamiliar means; it was in this way both a challenge and a pleasure.

Various voices scattered throughout my first year as a graduate student have emphasized the importance of “public-facing” writing as a necessary element of professional practice. This imperative, coupled with the feeling of pressing necessity of what’s called Critical University Studies, compelled the writing of the final component of my portfolio, an annotated bibliography. So-called “conservatives” such as Mac Donald often bemoan the state of academia, chiding English departments in particular for not studying “the classics.” (The above disclosure—that I haven’t really read much literature so far for my Ph.D. in English—confirms this assumption, misguided though it may be.) At the same time, op-ed after op-ed after op-ed written by well-meaning professors and administrators advocate for a similar “return” to the humanities, as if they were ever abandoned. Throughout the Mac Donald lecture I’ve described



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above, I wondered: why are English departments and the humanities in general so misunderstood? Why does the public's picture of what transpires in an English classroom so different than what *actually* transpires? Written after I took Jessica Yood's "Culture Wars" class this past spring, my annotated bibliography is an attempt to read books like Mac Donald's forthcoming tome in order better to understand these misunderstandings in an attempt to write better arguments on behalf of the discipline to which I've committed myself. Recovering the status of the humanities in the eyes of those who are most wont to malign it means first understanding *why* it's maligned; without this crucial first step, public-facing dialogues speak past the issue and fail to achieve any lasting change. As Rebecca Solnit has suggested, why write op-eds that preach to the choir when our discipline(s) might be better served if we turn in our pulpit to face the congregation and speak to the world?<sup>2</sup> This is the work this annotated bibliography prepares me to undertake.

The documents contained herein are thus varied but, in the long view of my projected *Interdiscipline*, have a kind of internal coherence: each attempts to bring things that are usually disparate together in new ways; each arrives at new conclusions—new, at least, to me—; and each is self-contained without being overly restricted by what's come before. Approaching the examination in this way has thus helped me better articulate my own goals and priorities. Pausing at this vantage point, looking forward as I stare down my second year of doctoral study, has been a self-study of my interests as I hope they'll unfold in the long view of a career.

My best work, of course, is ever yet to come.

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<sup>2</sup> See Solnit's November 2017 *Harper's* article, "Preaching to the Choir."

Additional Works Cited

Howard, Gerald. Interview with David Foster Wallace. *Elle Magazine* 11.6 (1996): 56.

Solnit, Rebecca. "Preaching to the Choir." *Harper's Magazine*, November 2017: 5-7.

### **Signification and Nonlinguistic Acoustic Percepts in Levinas' Ethical Framework**

[SLIDE 1] Today I'll be considering two local concerns that, when answered together, may point immediately towards nonstandard implications of the displacement of the subject Levinas' ethics seem to require. The "transparency" qualification ("Shadow" 135) Levinas applies to visual perception of art objects is usefully flexible, facilitating our maintenance of the distinction between these art objects' materiality and their representational content. Levinas' ethics is also a semiotics: the face-to-face relation is always a response to the already-said. In this way, hearing spoken language, especially within the aesthetic context, might also be characterized by a similar "transparency." But how "transparen[t]" are nonlinguistic acoustic percepts? Can nonlinguistic acoustic percepts signify? What about foreign speech, or sounds, linguistic or otherwise, heard outside the aesthetic context? This is my first concern.

My second is broader: Levinas' ethical framework seems to be able to accommodate nonlinguistic percepts that are sufficient to prompt an encounter with the other. So how might this other-encounter differ from the traditional Levinasian other-encounter language necessitates, whether through audition, vision, or tactition? And if it differs, what should we make of this difference?

After running through some brief definitions in order to clarify my methodology, I'll divide my remarks into a few rough unannounced phases. Rehearsing Levinas' account of aesthetic experience of visual art objects will sharpen my reading of Levinas' useful "transparency" qualification, which I've already mentioned. I'll then try to extrapolate the phenomenal experience of visual arts to other aesthetic modalities. I'll next touch on the broader question regarding the differences between acoustic other-encounters and verbal other-

encounters. Finally, I'll turn to some implications these conclusions might raise for this conference's attention towards indigeneity and occupation. [SLIDE 2]

**[1. Some orienting delimitations]<sup>1</sup>**

The term “nonlinguistic acoustic percepts” from my title carefully delimits the methodological bounds of what follows. There are a few things to unpack here.

First, I should say that I'm largely ignoring heard words in familiar languages in order to consider two more marginal and, for my purposes here, revealing categories of “nonlinguistic acoustic percepts.” The first, words heard in spoken foreign languages, is perhaps the more controversial of the two; it could be argued that I'm begging the very question at issue by asking if we hear spoken words the same way we hear words in languages we know, or sort of know, or in languages with relations to those we know. Furthermore, what, if any, harms are done when I classify these words I don't know as “nonlinguistic acoustic percepts”? (To what extent, in other words, are foreign words “nonlinguistic”?) This is a legitimate objection, one my final section will treat directly. The second category of nonlinguistic acoustic percepts, nonlinguistic sound utterances, is less controversial but certainly vaguer. I'll deal with a few questions. What qualifies as a nonlinguistic sound utterance? (Can we ever hear a yell or a scream the same way we might hear a voiced sneeze?) Furthermore, does it betray an unfair species chauvinism when I consider the ethics of human-issued nonlinguistic sound utterances to the exclusion of sound utterances by other animals? Am I overlooking the possibility of an ethical encounter with nonhuman speakers—or, perhaps more properly, sound-sayers? I'll consider the yell-versus-sneeze question over the course of what follows; that said, my conclusion will address the species chauvinism charge only in passing.

The second methodological point I should make is a bit stickier. I'm using the term "acoustic" rather than the perhaps more natural "auditory" in the phrase "nonlinguistic acoustic percepts" because talking about "sounds" conceals a fundamental ambiguity. A tree that falls in a forest makes a sound, even if nobody's there to hear it. If someone were there to hear it, he might hear a sound. The sound he hears might be different than the sound his slightly deaf grandmother might hear; if we say this, then we can also say that his auditory content differed from hers, even if what they heard—the acoustic content—was the same.

It might be easier to translate this problem to a different sense modality. My father is red-green colorblind, so he can't discriminate certain hues from others very well. I have normal vision. The color "content" of a red part of a stop sign appears differently to him than it does to me. We can thus speak sensibly of a distinction between objective content and mental or perceptual content.<sup>2</sup> The ambiguous word "sounds" might refer as equally to "auditory percepts," a term describing *what one hears*, as it does to "acoustic percepts," a term describing *what there is to be heard*.

In my first section, I'll discuss the role "transparency" Levinas assigns to aesthetic experiences of visual art. This "transparency" qualification allows him to prise apart the visual art object's materiality from its signification. I'd like to maintain a similar difference in my discussion of sounds, which is why I've spent time here drawing this rather tedious distinction. Levinas and I are interested sounds *as* we hear them. My reading of Levinas thus needs to start with sounds *before* we hear them in order to talk about what happens *as* we hear them. An advantage of the term "acoustic percept" is that it affords room for this specification. Okay, now we can begin.

## [2. The meat of it]

I'm going to offer a traditional reading of the next two slides that rehearses a commonsense distinction between written language and pictorial images. **[SLIDE 3]** The written letter doesn't tell us anything about its saying; unless you know the Cyrillic alphabet, this letter is unsayable. (You might not even know that it's a letter at all!) In contrast, a commonsense reading would maintain that letters are unlike images because imagistic depictions can be narrated: **[SLIDE 4]** you don't have to know anything about Ruby Bridges to say that Norman Rockwell's *The Problem We All Live With* is a painting of a young black girl.

It's contradictory, Levinas suggests, that whereas we usually believe "a symbol, a sign, or a word" ("Shadow" 135) might refer to its antecedent only arbitrarily, we insist that images as we seem them refer to their objects "opa[quely]"; we say that, unlike "symbol[s], [...] sign[s], or [...] word[s]," images purport to re-present reality. This re-presentation usually obscures the fact of the image itself, the fact that reality is re-presenting itself. **[SLIDE 5]** Levinas thus rejects this commonsense reading I've just described because it is uninformative of the somatic component of aesthetic experience. Written foreign language is pure image, similarly opaque, and we can encounter it only opaquely, through pure sensation. Such an affective account—one that describes how art makes us feel—doesn't start in the right place; it neglects, in other words, the very thing that most interests Levinas about art: not how it makes us feel (art's affect) but instead *how we feel it*. **[SLIDE 6]**

Levinas is very clear: describing the process of aesthetic representation requires outlining a phenomenology of aesthetic experience. "The aesthetic element" of an art work "is sensation" ("Shadow" 134), which is (ontologically) prior to any interpretation or understanding of the art work *as art*. In order to view art as imagistic, as having or portraying any image or content, one has "to see in an image its detachment from an object" (134), Levinas writes, thus separating the

*materiality* of the art work—and our somatic encounter with this materiality—from the art work’s aesthetic—that is, imagistic or representative—components. To speak of an art work’s content—to say that its content *re-presents* another thing, *depicts* it, *symbolizes* it in any way—or to speak of an art work at all is already to betray a prior somatic engagement with the art work that has already passed. Only in terms of the initial *sensational* experience of an art work can we speak of an aesthetic experience; without addressing the somatic, we can’t speak properly of art at all.

Levinas’ insistence on the primacy of the somatic component of aesthetic experience is not arbitrary; this insistence secures art’s place in his ethical schema. His conception of rhythm is extracted from its traditional confinement to the “arts of sound” (“Shadow” 133) and refracted it through his ethical paradigm. Classified as a new “general aesthetic category,” rhythm now “represents a unique situation where we cannot speak of consent, assumption, initiative, or freedom, because the subject is caught up and carried away by it” (132). “This reversal of power into participation” (133) requires that experiants “pa[ss] from oneself into anonymity.” The immediacy of the somatic displaces us from ourselves; we are thus alienated, rendered fundamentally passive, incapacitated by a “participation” we cannot help but accept, for in refusing such a “participation,” we articulate and reinstate ourselves.

In order to refuse something, one must conceptualize it. “Like the muscles of the mind” (“Shadow” 143), concepts allow us to resume control. The “muscl[e]” of conceptualization thus exerts a dual force: it allows us to force ourselves back into subjective being while at the same time equips us with a language with which we can discuss art and how it works. To say an art work *means* something is to ascribe to it representational powers, to look at it opaquely rather than transparently, as the pre-subject might in that somatic interval of initial reception. “The

consciousness of the representation lies in knowing that the object is not there” (136), Levinas writes. [SLIDE 7] Insofar as there is no art object yet to behold, the object’s materiality is transparent: Ruby Bridges’ profiled eyelashes are firstly brushstroke wisp; [SLIDE 8] the beige of the marshal’s jacket is initially discomposed, all tawny and ablaze with yellows and pinks. Seeing her eyelashes *as eyelashes* or the patch of jacket *as a patch of jacket*, however, already renders the meaning of the art work opaque, already obscures its materiality; we no longer see brushstroke or pink or the texture of the underlying canvas: images only occur to us as soon as we consider them as re-presentations of “object[s]” that are “not there.”

[SLIDE 9] In “The Transcendence of Words,” a meditation on sounds and sense masquerading as a review essay, Levinas draws a direct comparison between audition and vision. Vision enjoys a “primacy [...] with respect to the other senses,” Levinas writes, and it’s “on th[is] primacy of vision” that “rests the universality of art” (147). But sound breaks up this tight covariation: [SLIDE 10] “whereas, in vision, form is wedded to content, in sound the perceptible quality overflows so that form can no longer contain its content” (147). Acoustic percepts thus remain acoustic even through audition; sounds are still sounds, Levinas seems to be saying, even if they also *mean* something. Spoken language has a sonic “content” that transcends or otherwise exceeds semantic “content.” Whereas acoustic content always will coincide with auditory content even after the percept has been processed, after the subject audits the sound, the same words, when written, “are disfigured or ‘frozen,’ when language is transformed into documents and vestiges” (148). Unlike paintings or photographs, sounds can remain transparent even as we render them opaque through understanding.

Consider the May 2018 “yanny”/“laurel” internet controversy: pitch-shifting Dictionary.com’s sample 2007 pronunciation of the word “laurel” does to your ears what a



Necker cube might do to your eyes. I hear the word “yanny” but I’m supposed to be hearing the word “laurel”; the sound of a spoken word can thus exceed (and even contradict!) its semantic meaning. Sounds are selfsigns first and foremost, even if they also have some semantic content upon audition: a “sound is the symbol *par excellence*,” Levinas concludes.

[SLIDE 11] Gerald L. Bruns notes that the word “word” in the original French version of the quotation I’ve had up on this slide is not *mot* but *verbe*. This is a careful difference, one we ought to invoke in our reading of Levinas’ writing on sound and signification, if only because it connotes the word as it unfolds before the ear. *Verbe* is “the *mot* in its transcendence,” which in this transcendence “is always more expression than idea, more *parole* than *langue*, more enigma than phenomenon, more *sens* than *signification*, more *Dire* than *Dir*” (197). This transcendent “priority of sound over semantics is meant to indicate the event of sociality,” Bruns writes, for “the sound of words is an ethical event.” [SLIDE 12]

“The sound of words is an ethical event”—this is a useful observation, not least because it conforms to a traditional reading of Levinas’ ethical system, which manifests itself in and is required by any use of language. In “Ethics as First Philosophy,” Levinas writes that “language is born in responsibility” (82). Diagnosing this “responsibility” permits the ethical conclusion that “one has to respond to one’s right to be.” This “respons[e]” presupposes a respondent: to what but a prompt can one respond? And how can a prompt be given except by some other? This is precisely Levinas’ point: this prompt already requires that, in speaking, we reify the Other, with which we must always reckon from the start. [SLIDE 13] “From the beginning there is a face to face steadfast in its exposure to invisible death, to a mysterious forsakenness” (83), Levinas writes: “Beyond the visibility of whatever is unveiled, and prior to any knowledge about death, mortality lies in the Other.” This “responsibility for my neighbor” is born of the “face” we

must always “face” when entering into language and towards whom we must direct our “respon[se]”; even if we are first to speak, the other to whom our speech is in response is thus *always* ontologically antecedent to ourselves. [SLIDE 14]

Yet Bruns’ conclusion still resounds: “The sound of words is an ethical event.” What about other sounds? Do they have similar ethical implications? Levinas is insistent that language *use*, insofar as it conjures an other-encounter, always already has ethical implications. And, as we’ve seen, hearing words *as words* requires that we conjure ourselves even as we listen to an other. Spoken and speaking language has a similar opacity to that of representations seen *as representations*, and images seen *as images*; only in hearing foreign words or nonlinguistic sound utterances are we confronted with a purely transparent percept. The sonic experience of these acoustic percepts—and, recall, we hear them *acoustically*; the only content that can be said to be *audited* is these percepts’ *narrow* contents insofar as such content can be shared<sup>3</sup>—this sonic experience is necessarily a *denuded* one. Nonlinguistic acoustic percepts are thus always transparent; we cannot hear them opaquely as we can with language.

### [3. Where it gets juicy]

[SLIDE 15] But what counts as a nonlinguistic acoustic percept? I’ll now speculate on the two categories of this type of sound I mentioned at the outset. The two types of sounds that Levinas’ treatment of other-encounters overlooks are (1) utterances in foreign languages and (2) nonlinguistic sound utterances. I’ll start with the second because I think it holds some implications for the first. [SLIDE 16]

I might with Jacques Derrida suggest that it’s rather *the person speaking* and not *the words spoken* that matters: it’s precisely because “to express oneself is to be *behind* the sign” that Derrida can say in “Violence and Metaphysics” that “the written and the work are not

expressions but signs for Levinas” (126, emphasis in original). This is all well and good. Any speech, including thought, which is, Derrida claims, a kind of speech for Levinas—any speech, linguistic or not, “is therefore immediately face [*sic*]” (125). This seems to suggest that nonlinguistic sound utterances such as moans, yells, cries, and other everyday utterances can signify because there is someone “*behind* the sign.” Similarly, when we hear sentences in a language we don’t know, we’re also implicated in the ethical relation precisely because we can identify the sentences *as language*. Such an identification—of language *as language*—is sufficient to render the acoustic percept opaque through audition, to understand semantic content *as content-full*, to understand the sign *as a sign*. Even if we don’t know what’s being said, we still know there’s *something being said* or *some being doing the saying*.

This also might work when inverted. Say, for example, I’m staying at a hotel in Minsk. I don’t know Russian, and the woman checking me in doesn’t know English. But when I ask, “where’s the bathroom?” in enough different ways, and make enough accompanying gestures, the hotelier successfully points towards the restroom to the left of the reception desk. We can signify without being directly understood; this is Derrida’s point about Levinas: standing “*behind* the sign” (126) is what matters, not (necessarily) the *content* of the sign itself. Our ethical implication is in our *saying*, not in our *said*. Recall Bruns’s exegesis of this [SLIDE 17] quotation: Levinas uses *verbe* instead of *mot* insofar as the ethical imperative of the face-to-face inheres “more” in the “*Dire* than [it does in the] *Dit*” (197).

[SLIDE 18] Are words in foreign languages nonlinguistic sound utterances? Or are they just linguistic utterances in their own right? As I’ve suggested, saying these foreign words are “nonlinguistic sound utterances” might commit an unnecessary violence. They *are* words, even if we don’t understand them *as* words. Foreign words we hear aren’t “nonlinguistic” (if they were,

they wouldn't be *words*; this relation is definitional). Yet they *are* “nonlinguistic” to hearers who don't understand these words. And this is exactly where the ethics become a bit messy. The above reading of Levinas might necessitate that we conclude foreign words entail an ethical relation exactly like that which native words necessitates. I'm going to push back against this conclusion and suggest instead that, insofar as we fail to recognize them as words, foreign words *are not* nonlinguistic sound utterances in the same way yells or shouts or foreign language understood despite its foreignness at reception desks in Minsk might be. At least in these nonlinguistic sound utterances (such as yells or shouts) we can recognize that something is *trying* to be said; [SLIDE 19] when I see this symbol [Ж] I can't read it precisely because I don't know if it's a letter in a language or not. (It is a letter, as I discovered when I made this PowerPoint.) I can't identify the ethical being “*behind*” (Derrida 126) this sign because I can't identify it *as a sign* at all. When we fail or refuse to hear foreign words *as words*, these sounds remain transparent and acoustic, meaningless and *nonsignifying* because we fail or refuse to audit them; and in this transparency, recall, we are ourselves disarticulated, acquainted with our own alterity as much we are with the other's. The failure or refusal to audit and thus admit these sounds into the signifying order exposes in a more extreme way radical alterity.

#### [4. Concluding meditations]

[SLIDE 20] Without, I hope, too much gratuitous shoehorning, I'll now try to weave together the theoretics I've outlined into a practical context. Admittedly, this paper has taken up a rather local issue, one that seems at first not to have much commerce with the indigenous concerns this conference—and presence on these long-seized lands—asks us to consider.

In his book on *Levinas and the Postcolonial*, John E. Drabinski notes that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is able to invoke the “history” of the “ungraspable” (Drabinski 71) because

Levinas has suggested that “it is not a question of properly clearing the conceptual or linguistic field in order to hear the Other’s voice.” The matter, rather, is that “difference is absolute, first.” Without fetishizing “first contact,” the long backward gaze filtered through a history of genocide, oppression, enslavement, and disruption can still recognize the devastating irony of European colonizers’ initial reactions to the foreign languages of the antecedent indigenous inhabitants of the Americas. As the enforcers of oppression, they *were already engaged* in an ethical relation to those to whom they denied personhood, for this denial—the forced denial to recognize indigenous speech as speech, for example, of Richard Henry Pratt’s (in)famous “kill the Indian, save the man” dictum, a motto that motivated his brutal English-only pedagogies of his Carlisle Indian Industrial School—this denial already betrays an implication in an ethical relation with the other. The failure to realize such a refusal has already drawn the other into one’s orbit—or, rather the self into the *other’s* orbit—is the most radical—and the most devastating—ethical relation there is.

**[SLIDE 21]** What violences do we commit when we hear a woman’s scream on the street as a dog howling? Our inadvertent inhumanity is further proof of our precedent installation within the ethical world. Saying Levinas’ silence on sounds demonstrates this conclusion by its very silence might be a bit of a stretch. But it’s certainly the case that in attending to the unsounded sonic in Levinas’ writing we can uncover another dimension of the return to the self, itself “returning to itself in a continuous time” (*Totality and Infinity* 307).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> These section headings are not to be said; they're just useful in guiding my own thinking. I should also note at this point that the endnotes I'm including here clarify my own thinking and inform possible challenges to some of the assumptions underlying my above discussion of Levinas.

<sup>2</sup> Making this analogy—and drawing this conclusion from it—is an extremely risky move, but it's explanatorily useful, so I've made it anyways. Whether or not assuming such an intuitive conclusion drawn from common sense is permissible is a whole different matter, which is why I say it's "risky." Furthermore, in drawing this analogy, I've left unaddressed two undeniably hot-button objections floating around right now: (1) that intermodal perception is the sum of all sensory modalities' perception of a single "thing" rather than one distinct sensory experience (i.e., that we can speak of "perceptual experience" only in terms of *all* the senses at once), and (2) that we can analogize sensory modalities at all. In some ways, vision and audition are remarkably symmetrical. There are three dimensions of the visual quality space: hue, brightness, and saturation. Similarly, the auditory quality space also has three dimensions: pitch, timbre, and loudness. In other ways, we might argue that vision and audition are fundamentally incomparable: sight is a rather bad way of tracking time, whereas duration is arguably a fourth fundamental axis of the auditory quality space dimension.

These risky assumptions undergird the rest of the paper's discussion about whether or not Levinas' "transparency" stipulation on the aesthetic experience of visual art objects also might apply to aesthetic experiences that take place in other sense modalities such as hearing or touch. (Tactition is a similarly vexing sense, but one the literature has treated significantly more than it's treated audition.) It would take up too much time to rehearse all of this in the paper, but

I've prepared it here in this endnote in case I get a question about the legitimacy of comparing sense modalities—in other words, this is in anticipation of the following line of questioning:

“Why are you trying to make Levinas say the same thing about sight and hearing? Why are you trying to export the “transparency” qualification to audition?”

<sup>3</sup> The narrow content question is rather controversial, but invoking it is explanatorily useful in this case. Very roughly, narrow contents are contents particular to an individual that can be specified without reference to external conditions. Narrow contents, then, are intrinsic to an individual; they are the *sine qua non* of a certain thing, those things without which a certain individual cannot be said to be that individual. (I'm using “individual” here ecumenically; it's a way to refer not just to human “individuals” but also to thought-content “individuals,” which include not just pennies and Putnam-style “water”s but also to human individuals as well.) So when I say, “the only content that can be said to be *audited* is these percepts' *narrow* contents, insofar as such content can be shared” I mean to refer just to the essential properties of the percepts—those properties, in other words, that not only native and foreign hearers perceive but also that animals and non-human or non-language-using-but-still-human actors perceive, too.

(This is also why it's important for this pedant to maintain the apparently tedious acoustic/auditory distinction: acoustic percepts are invariable no matter the auditor, whether or not, per Putnam, it's a morphologically identical agent (on Twin Earth, say), and no matter the existence or not of shared-content concepts in the classical sense. Note that this latter possibility still holds regardless of the Swampman question, which tests *reference* relations, not content determination. Furthermore, my acoustic/auditory distinction is also useful in the context of the phenomenal-versus-intentional-properties debate as well. Whereas the received story of mental representation might insist that phenomenal properties are separate from but supervene on

intentional properties, the phenomenal intentionality program insists that the supervenience relation goes in the opposite direction: intentional content, on this view, is downstream from phenomenal experience—that, in other words, there is a kind of content determined not by the relation of mental “content” to real-world “content,” as the traditional representationalist would have it, but rather by phenomenal experience. This allows the phenomenal intentionalists to say not just that narrow content is that which is constitutive of the phenomenal experience of a certain thing across various agents but also that phenomenal experience might itself be a kind of narrowly-determined content. The acoustic/auditory hair-splitting facilitates and, at the same time, bypasses these discussions. The question of foreign words brings these distinctions especially to light, but these distinctions, to be fair, are admittedly marginal, worth noting and gesturing towards, perhaps, but not worth deciding on.)



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PowerPoint

**SLIDE 1**

# Signification and Nonlinguistic Acoustic Percepts in Levinas' Ethical Framework

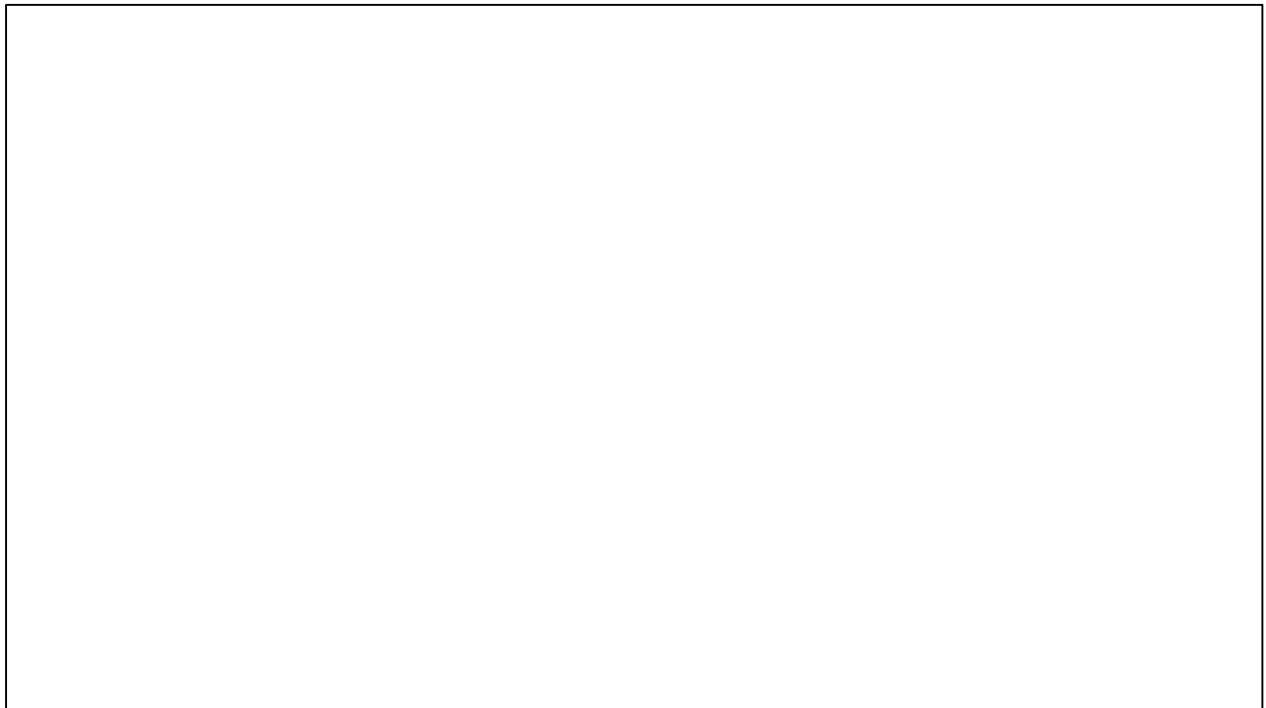
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*The Graduate Center, City University of New York*

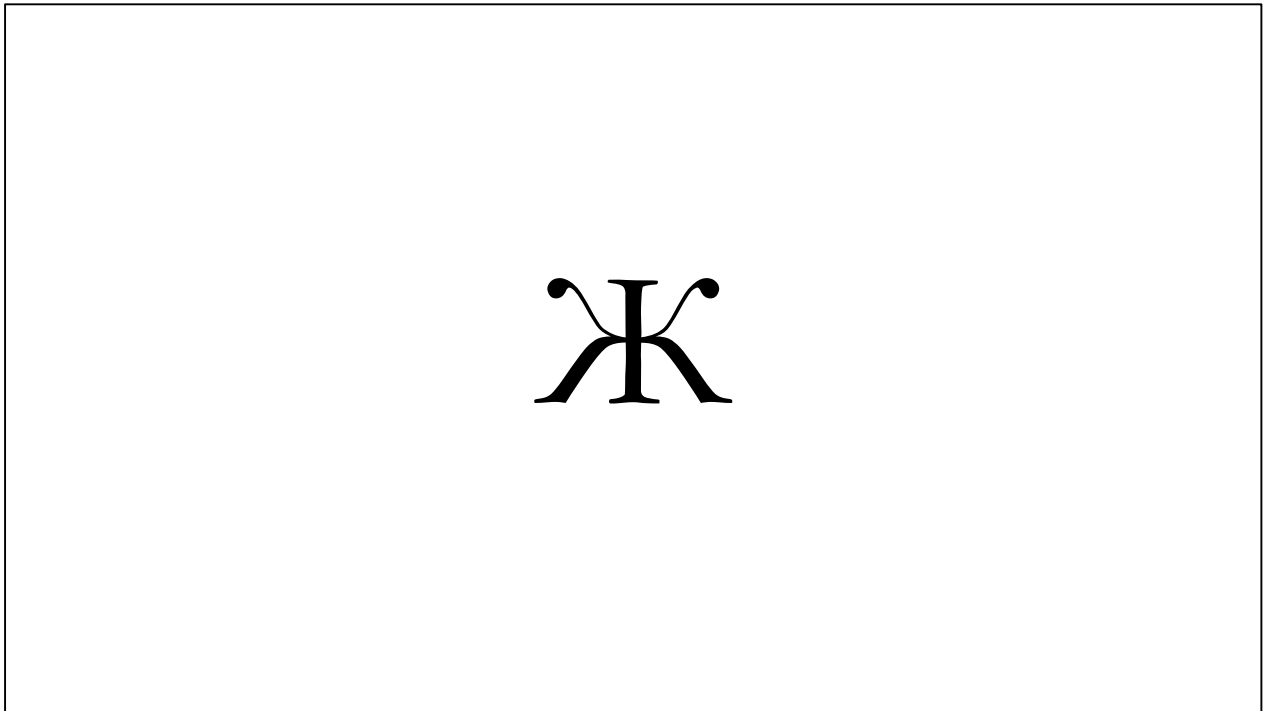
*NALS 2018*

*2 August 2018*

**SLIDE 2**



SLIDE 3



SLIDE 4

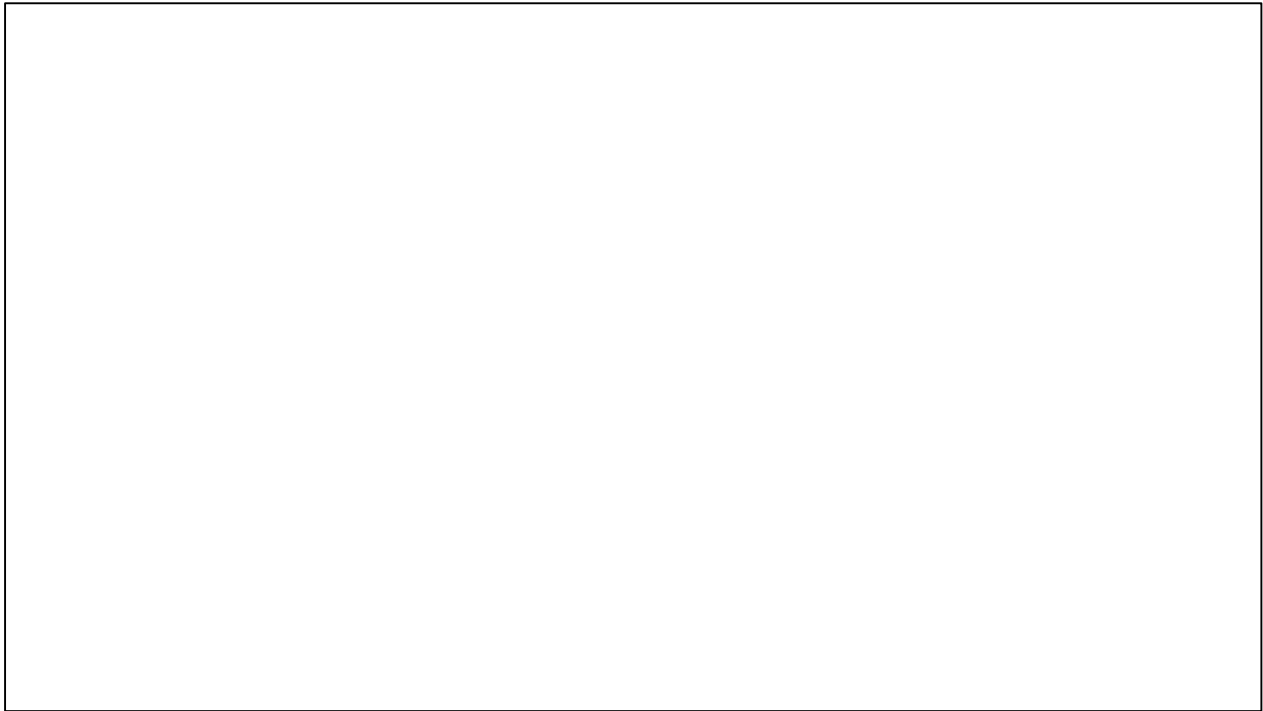


**SLIDE 5**



*Flanked by U.S. marshals, Ruby Bridges exits  
William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans, Louisiana  
on or around November 14, 1960*

**SLIDE 6**



**SLIDE 7**



**SLIDE 8**



SLIDE 9

Vision is a relation with a being such that the being attained through it precisely appears as the world. Sound, for its part, appeals to intuition and can be given. This naturally involves the primacy of vision with respect to the other senses. And **on the primacy of vision rests the universality of art.**

SLIDE 10

In sound, and in the consciousness termed hearing, there is in fact **a break with the self-complete world of vision and art.** In its entirety, sound is a ringing, clanging scandal. Whereas, in vision, form is wedded to content in such a way as to appease it, **in sound the perceptible quality overflows** so that **form can no longer contain its content.** A real rent is produced in the world, through which the world that is *here* prolongs a dimension that cannot be converted into vision. It is in this way, by surpassing what is given, that **sound is the symbol *par excellence*.** If none the less it can appear as a phenomenon, as a *here*, it is because the transcendence it brings about operates only in verbal sound. **The sounds and noises of nature are failed words. To really hear a sound, we need to hear a word. Pure sound is the word.**

**SLIDE 11**

**The sounds and noises of nature  
are failed words. To really hear a sound, we need to hear a word.  
Pure sound is the word.**

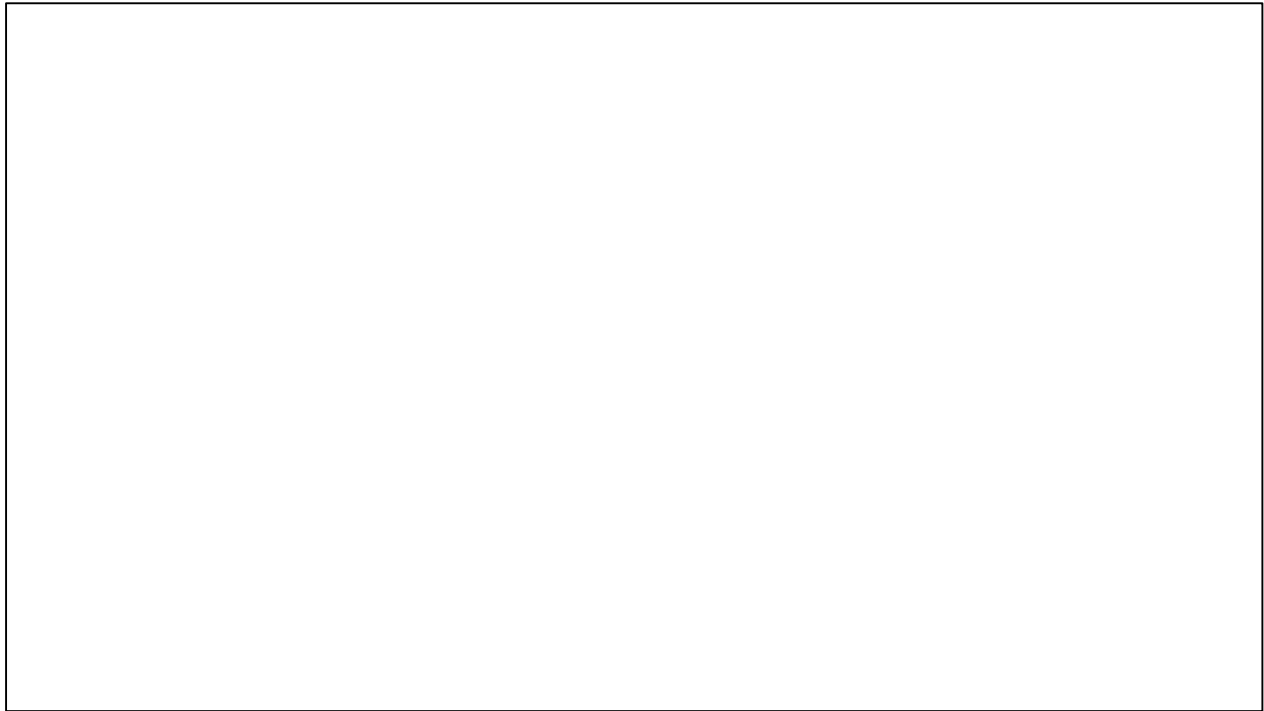
**SLIDE 12**



**SLIDE 13**

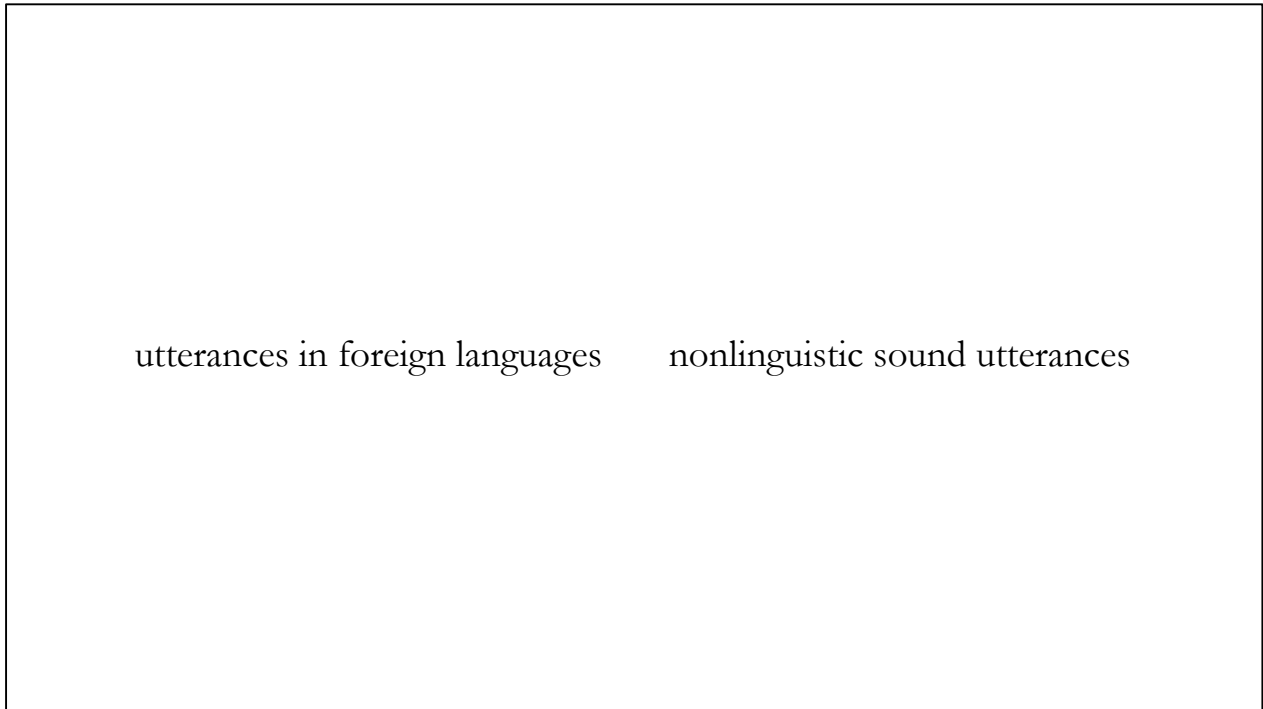
But always the face shows through these forms. Prior to any particular expression and beneath all particular expressions [...] there is a nakedness and destitution of the expression as such, that is to say extreme exposure, defenselessness, vulnerability itself. [...] **From the beginning there is a face to face** steadfast in its exposure to invisible death, to a mysterious forsakenness. Beyond the visibility of whatever is unveiled, and prior to any knowledge about death, mortality lies in the Other.

**SLIDE 14**





**SLIDE 15**



**SLIDE 16**



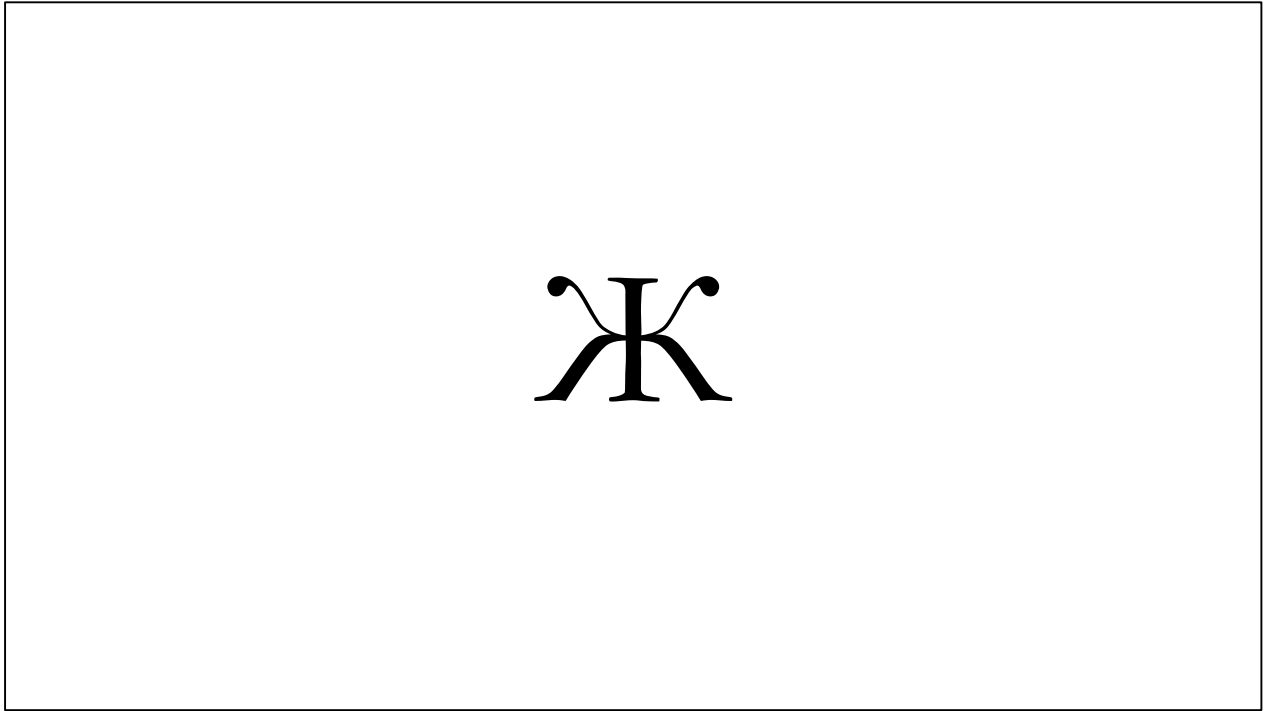
**SLIDE 17**

The sounds and noises of nature  
are failed words. To really hear a sound, we need to hear a word.  
Pure sound is the word.

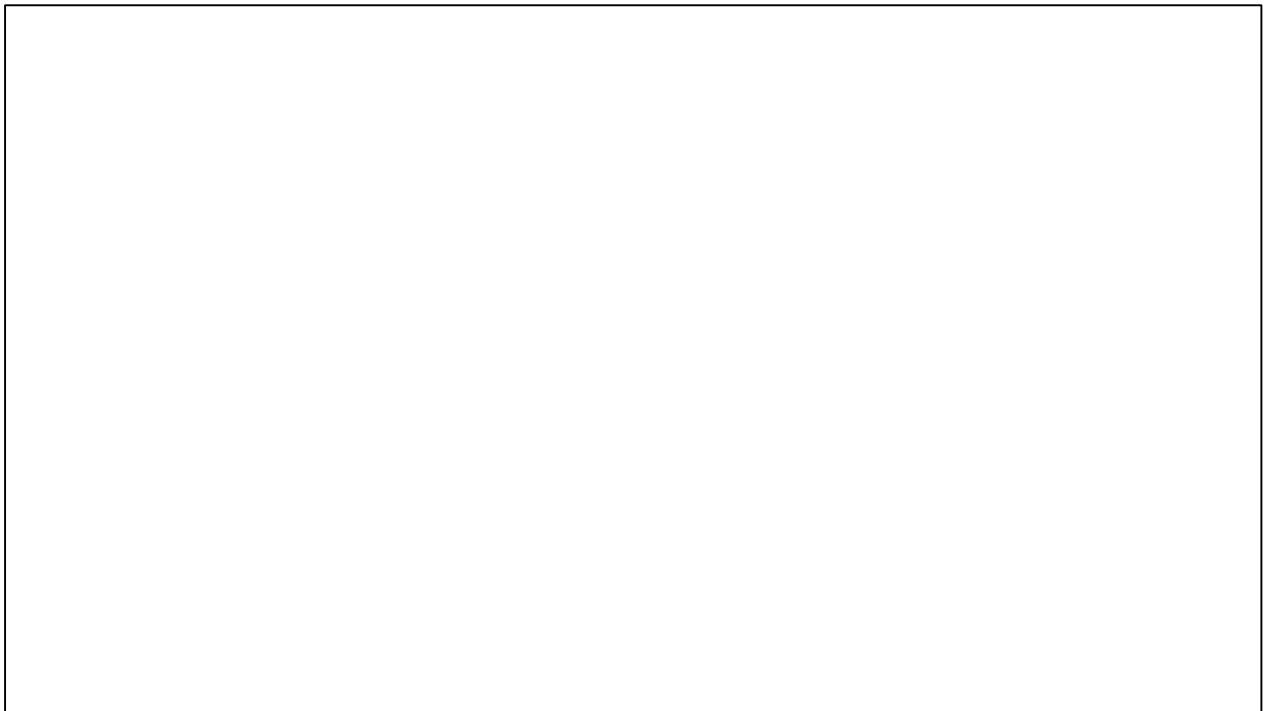
**SLIDE 18**

utterances in foreign languages  $\overset{=}{\underset{\neq}{?}}$  nonlinguistic sound utterances

**SLIDE 19**



**SLIDE 20**



**SLIDE 21**

# Signification and Nonlinguistic Acoustic Percepts in Levinas' Ethical Framework

*REDACTED*

*The Graduate Center, City University of New York*

*NALS 2018*

*2 August 2018*

Call for Papers

13<sup>th</sup> Annual International Conference of the  
NORTH AMERICAN LEVINAS SOCIETY



Levinas, Displacement & Repair

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CALL FOR PAPERS

The natural *conatus essendi* of a sovereign *I* is put into question by the death or the mortality of the other; in the ethical vigilance through which the sovereignty of the *I* can see itself as 'hateful,' and see its 'place in the sun' as the 'image and beginning of the usurpation of the whole world.'

~Emmanuel Levinas, "Diachrony and Representation"

**Emmanuel Levinas** writes extensively about the temptations of knowledge and the seductions of intelligibility and intentional consciousness as they enable a fascination for ontology, power, and war. For nearly 13 years, the North American Levinas Society has worked to preserve and focus this critique through social apertures that privilege questions of historical violence, transgenerational suffering, memory and repair. As a society, we have not only struggled together through difficult exegesis with Levinas' work, but we have also sought to bring such ethical critique into dialogue with other philosophers of liberation, postcolonial scholars, indigenous intellectuals, Asian American scholars, philosophers of diaspora, religious thinkers, and victims and survivors of modern national projects, ecological devastation, and global economy. For our 13<sup>th</sup> annual conference, the NALS invites participants to continue this tradition by taking up the question of "displacement and repair" across generations.

We are especially moved to take up this question of displacement on the grounds of Western Carolina University, which houses a Cherokee Center and runs a robust Cherokee Studies program. One of Levinas' most prolific exegetes, Enrique Dussel, noted at a time in his life when he could no longer identify as European, "The philosophy that we studied set out from the Greeks, in whom we saw our most remote lineage. The Amerindian World had no presence in our studies, and none of our professors would have been able to articulate the origin of philosophy with reference to indigenous peoples."<sup>1</sup> Despite the prevalence in Levinas studies to insist on the validity of counter-hegemonic critique from those on the underside of history, there is still a profound silence to the question of how we might encounter Levinas' work through indigenous inspirations in the context of the Americas. Even the most celebrated works that take up Levinas in postcolonial contexts remain relatively mute on this question. With a concern for situating wisdom in its place and "translating" intelligibility across various modalities of consciousness, however, we ought to approach Levinas with questions about displacement, usurpation, genocide, and ecocide—together with questions of repair across generations—with an ethical vigilance renewed by the very exigencies of place where concentration camps were designed and built in order to mobilize the displacement of indigenous peoples through what is called "the trail of tears."

Toward this end, the 13<sup>th</sup> annual NALS conference opens a collective concern for the question of "displacement and repair" that does not further contribute to the displacement and marginalization of indigenous histories, survivance, and intellectual traditions. At the same time, as has been customary since the founding of the Society, we also welcome papers on any topic in Levinas studies that happens to be of interest to you.

**Instructions for Submitting Proposals**

Please prepare materials for blind review and send them via email attachment to the conference proposal committee chair, **Sol Neely** ([sneely@alaska.edu](mailto:sneely@alaska.edu)) with the subject "NALS 2018 Proposal" before May 11, 2018. All submissions will be acknowledged, and notifications of acceptance will be sent out by May 18, 2018 along with information on conference registration.

- **Individual Paper Proposals** should be 200-300 words for a 15-20 minute presentation.
- **Panel Proposals** should be 400 words for 75-90 minute panel sessions. Please include on separate cover the session title and name of organizer or panel chair, along with participants' names, institutional affiliations, disciplines or departments.

**ALL PROPOSALS ARE DUE MAY 11, 2018.**

Please direct all inquiries concerning the conference to the conference organizers, James McLachlan (director) and Sol Neely. General questions regarding the Society should be directed to Erik Garret, NALS President ([garrette@duq.edu](mailto:garrette@duq.edu)) or Dara Hill, NALS Executive Secretary ([levinassociety@gmail.com](mailto:levinassociety@gmail.com)).

<sup>1</sup> See "Transmodernity and Interculturality: An Interpretation from the Perspective of Philosophy of Liberation."

Abstract

This paper considers two local concerns that, when answered together, may point immediately towards nonstandard implications of the displacement of the subject Levinas' ethics seem to require. The "transparency" qualification Levinas applies to visual perception of art objects is usefully flexible, facilitating our maintenance of the distinction between these art objects' materiality and their representational content. Levinas' ethics is also a semiotics: the face-to-face relation is always a response to the already-said. In this way, hearing spoken language, especially within the aesthetic context, might also be characterized by a similar "transparency." But how "transparen[t]" are nonlinguistic acoustic percepts? Can nonlinguistic acoustic percepts signify? What about foreign speech, or sounds, linguistic or otherwise, heard outside the aesthetic context? This is my first concern. The second is broader: Levinas' ethical framework seems to be able to accommodate nonlinguistic percepts that are sufficient to prompt an encounter with the other. So how might this other-encounter differ from the "traditional" Levinasian other-encounter language necessitates, whether through audition, vision, or tactition? And if it differs, what should we make of this difference? Without fetishizing "first contact," I'll consider these implications in the context of hearing a foreign language: What happens when we hear speech totally foreign from our own? What if we don't recognize it as spoken language? To what extent can we consider hearing a foreign language as hearing a nonlinguistic sound utterance? What violence might this hearing enact? Is this an inevitable or mandatory ethical failure? Does my elision of "hearing a foreign language" with "hearing a nonlinguistic acoustic percept" collapse the very distinction at issue, thereby committing another critical violence?

**[sic]: Defending the Academy in Light of Conservative Arguments Against It**

U.S. taxpayer-funded higher education amounts at best to insufficient but subsidized preparation for the real world and at worst to a publically-funded course in butchered, ideological, anti-traditionalist, left-orthodox indoctrination. The chief “import from the academy” into larger society is the “circumambient bigotry” latent in the “feverswamps of academic gender and queer theory,” twin practices too myopically focused on “gonads and melanin” actually to engage in any substantive advancement of human knowledge (Mac Donald lecture).<sup>1</sup>

—This is the argument Heather Mac Donald advanced in an October 2017 Manhattan Institute-sponsored lecture. And in a *City Journal* article from earlier that year titled “The True Purpose of the University,” Mac Donald argues for a return to what she views as the traditional texts and subjects of higher education. Undergraduate syllabi ought to remain focused on that “universe of knowledge that does not belong to the realm of ‘opinion’” (7) because forming such “opinions” means first addressing an upstream concern: “the problem of student ignorance” (5) with respect to the “bedrock of core facts and ideas that precede any [...] interpretation.” “There will be enough time after students graduate to debate current affairs” (7), Mac Donald concludes.

Her position is neither isolated nor all that radical, situated firmly within conservative America’s mainstream discourse. Insofar as they’ve strayed from their “original” or “traditional” teachings, “the humanities” as classically conceived are at the heart of the university Mac Donald and others like her are wont to damn. And attacks such as the one she launches above are common; defending against them is a minor sporting past time, the annals of which are recorded in the public-facing opinion pages of publications such as *The Chronicle Review* and *The New York Times*. Often, such defenses conclude that the teaching of the humanities is a worthy end in

itself. Yet this conclusion is eerily similar to the one at which Mac Donald and other traditionally conservative and right-of-center voices arrive: Elizabeth Corey's recent advocacy in the *Chronicle Review* of a university that holds within itself both so-called "identity studies," which by definition (so she argues) cannot stay neutral, and at the same time affords room for cultivation of the "moral and ethical virtue" of disinterest might be fruitfully juxtaposed to Mac Donald's above denunciation of "opinions." "If this sounds old-fashioned," Corey concludes, "that's because it is." I wonder what, if any, further similarities exist between their arguments on behalf of "the humanities"—and for higher education—and those launched from within the academy? The following two lists aim to ferret out an answer to this question.

My title, "[sic]," reflects a good-faith methodology that would drive a project based on this annotated bibliography—work that reads original pop-cultural documents in their temporal and historical contexts—reads them, in other words, on their own terms. Kimball and Bower's shared habit of quoting discipline-specific terms in discipline specific ways, which often deviate from standard usage, out of context, and adding "[sic]" to flag nonstandard usages as examples of academic pretension or empty posturing prompt this project's guiding ethos. "[sic]" thus also refers in a more literal way to the practice reading the right-of-center's objections in their original forms. (How to know what's being said other than by reading the primary documents in which these arguments are explicated?) My intention here is not to fact-check or to dismantle, though these pursuits, to be sure, are necessary. The intent for such a project is rather to discover unlikely points of confluence—in premises, conclusions, warrants, or logical forms—between traditionally conservative texts or texts lauded by conservatives in order to cobble together a point of departure traditionally left unaddressed.



This study does not aim to justify the warrant of this good faith ethos.<sup>2</sup> Reading against the grain—accepting premises we (or I) might otherwise reject on various grounds in order better to understand the arguments against our (or my) best efforts—might sometimes be an uncomfortable undertaking. But, given a provisional, temporary, and clearly delimited tolerance for the premises and conclusions we (or I) might regard as intolerable, we might better grasp how and why some of the conventional demonstrations of the university’s (and the humanities’) necessity conservatives often dismiss. Providing a cross-section of standard and right-of-standard mainstream discourse on the humanities and the proper purview of the American university might point towards improved techniques for launching our defenses. Our current arguments haven’t convinced the right of the value of the work English and other humane disciplines usually undertake. Reading these rejections of our arguments might point towards better, more efficacious lines of argumentation.

The argument could—and ought to—be made that framing the issue as one oscillating between “the conservative” and “the academic” (or “the liberal”)<sup>3</sup> points of view presupposes the town-gown divide I’m trying to resolve: such question-begging is counterproductive, indulging in the very kind of circular chicken-egg teleology such a project might be obliged to prise apart. This is a worthy objection, one twinned at the outset with the accusation that my assumption that there exist such entities as “the everyday conservative” and “the everyday academic” manufactures the same groups I’m trying to put into productive dialogue. Strawmen abound, and broad strokes, it might be noted, do not a careful argument make. But in order to answer the question “who started it”—or to do away with it entirely—there needs to be some way to end it—and ending it begins with finding such common ground. This common ground—whether,

contentual, rhetorical, or citational—ought to be recovered, if only for the preservation of the university in any form.<sup>4</sup>

The following bibliography has two components. Bibliography A, what I'm calling "The Primary Cultural Documents List," comprises books generally considered to be popular successes, written either by authors clearly within the ranks of conservative intelligentsia (Bawer, Buckley, Cheney, perhaps Deresiewicz, D'Souza, Kimball) or by authors whose works have been lauded by conservative intelligentsia (Bloom, Hofstadter, Kipnis (though perhaps not really), Sokal and Bricmont). Hofstadter, whose Pulitzer-winning *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* I've put on Bibliography B, might be quick to remind us that Buckley is no Mencken;<sup>5</sup> this distinction might be made for more than a few of the books on this list, given that some are more overtly ideological or polemical than others. Kipnis, for example, takes pains to distinguish her staunch feminist position from the more conservative-minded praise her work has in the past received. And Sokal and Bricmont caution against reading their work as an endorsement of small-c conservative anti-academic arguments. This list is thus variegated but unified in that all are listed on or invoked in the context of conservative reading lists treating the state of education in America.

A text on Bibliography B, which I'm terming "The Academic's List," most clearly treats the tensions this paper seeks to address. Shield and Dunn, in their volume *Passing on the Right*, articulate the main contradiction motivating my collection of all of the texts on Bibliography A: "Progressive academics cannot have it both ways," they write: "They cannot lend their credentials to political crusades *and* expect to be treated like a nonpartisan institution floating above a factionalized world" (9, emphasis in original). The painstakingly neutral tone Shield and Dunn's book adopts is characteristic of all the works on this second list, which is comprised of

texts written by academics for (primarily) their colleagues, other academics. Some (Ellis, Felski, Watkins) traffic in the technical jargon after which Kimball or Bawer might insert a “[sic]”; of these, two (Ellis, Felski) fashion themselves as theoretical-critical interventions, with their sights clearly fixed on disciplinary reform. Another (McGurl) is a more traditional literary history argued from an institutional standpoint.

The argument could be made that the texts by Ellis, Felski, Kipnis, and Sokal and Bricmont ought to be classified together in a list of their own. I’ve allocated them to different lists, however, because they have been used in different ways: Kipnis’s and Sokal and Bricmont’s texts take pains to acknowledge both their own self-described politically liberal leanings as well as their distance from the political right, which has, to be sure, used them for its own ends. I’ve placed Ellis’s and Felski’s texts, which could both potentially be read<sup>6</sup> in service of a small-c conservative viewpoint, on the second list because of their relatively limited cultural diffusion. In other words, they aren’t as widely read, so I’ve placed them on the second list instead of the first.

That these texts and others might well belong on another list points towards just the very common ground that the project this bibliography supports seeks to recover. Just as the proof of the pudding is in the eating, so too will the hypothesis I’ve outlined above be proven or disproven over the course of completing such a study. The below summaries, however, speak to one another on different levels. Even if only better to historicize Mac Donald’s rather shocking statements with which I opened, the necessity of this project is pressing; the bibliographies’ inter- and intra-list coherence compels this project’s completion.

**Bibliography A: The Primary Cultural Documents List**

Bawer, Bruce. *The Victims' Revolution: The Rise of Identity Studies and the Closing of the*

*Liberal Mind*. Broadside, 2012. Writing from the anxious space left open by the “los[s] of sensible centrism” (xi) in American public discourse, Bawer argues that the “bright success” (xiii) of the civil rights movement was dimmed by the nearly concurrent emergence of multiculturalism, “a philosophy [...] founded not on individual rights and liberties but on the claims of group identity and culture.” Bawer’s book is structured around what he identifies as various identity-specific subdisciplines of the humanities—there are chapters on women’s, black, queer, and chicano studies—resulting from multiculturalism’s “relativism” (xvi). “Headquartered” in English departments (8), these studies and their products amount to little more than “postmodern busywork” (29), Bower argues. The result is a generation of young people ignorant of the “blessing” (327) of leisure time during which aesthetic criticism unfolds. The postmodernists have “rob[bed] young people of their priceless legacy”: “human civilization” (331). The remedy? Recovering the “*true* humanities” (332, emphasis in original) by refusing to engage in post-Marcusian scholarship and by opting instead to recover the kind of free speech-driven ethos Mill advocated. Difficult—“After all, there’s nothing more entrenched than a tenured professor” (347)—but vitally necessary, this recovery might save the most important thing at stake: “the future of America” (350).

Bloom, Allan. *The Closing of the American Mind*. Simon & Schuster, 1987. “Liberal

democracies do not fight wars with one another,” Bloom writes, “cultures fight wars with one another” (202). Regardless of politics, class, or the like, the relativist dogma has assumed the cultural mantle; at the center of American life lies a premise that is as shaky

as it is entrenched: the only truth is that truth is now relative. Such “relativism has extinguished the real motive of education, the search for a good life” (34), Bloom asserts, and the failure to heed the direction of this nonrelativist “real motive” constitutes a moral failure, a failure to develop reason—a failure tantamount to “render[ing] ineffective the instrument that can correct [...] prejudic[e]” (40). Insofar as “society is ministerial to the university” (245), Bloom argues, it has a stewardly duty, one that even—or especially—in “hard times” (312) must regard the university as the primary locus of the kind of “atmosphere of free inquiry” (244) that facilitates democracy and good governance. The incoherent undergraduate experience (380), on which subject Bloom’s study concludes, stems from the relativism with which he opened. Bloom instructs us to return to Plato’s *Republic*, after which might remain the “residue of the highest and non-illusory possibility” of direction by which we can navigate this “American moment in world history, the one for which we shall forever be judged” (382).

Buckley, William F., Jr. *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of “Academic Freedom.”* 50th anniversary ed., Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2002. Founder of *The National Review* and widely regarded as a leading conservative voice “for an entire generation” (Nash), Buckley launched his career with an institutional critique of his alma mater, Yale. Alumni hold the keys to the university’s continued long-term success; not writing this book would neglect the archive, a failure that amounts to muting the only governing voice that matters. “There exists a disparity between the values the alumni of Yale *want* to be taught, and those currently *being* taught” (43, emphases in original), and it’s from this “disparity” that Buckley launches his complaint: if “Yale’s predominant biases” (104) are left unaddressed, the future of the institution will be left in the hands of students

taught under these “biases.” The alumni, whose private funds Buckley claims are the primary support for the institution, “are the ultimate overseers of university policy” (156). Given his accounting of the sorry state of undergraduate education at Yale, they ought to withhold donations until the administration takes care that its faculty more carefully prise apart their teaching responsibilities from their research interests. Failing this, the alumni will “be guilty of supine and unthinking fatalism” leading to the downfall of the institution and, ultimately, the nation.

Cheney, Lynne V. *Telling the Truth: Why Our Culture and Our Country Have Stopped Making Sense—and What We Can Do About It*. Simon & Schuster, 1995. Fresh from chairing the National Endowment for the Humanities, Cheney here argues that “something that was trivially true,” namely that “we can never get totally outside ourselves and divorce ourselves of all our interests [...] was being inflated” (15) by the academy in the late 1980s and early 1990s beyond the point of meaning. Writing against “this postmodern approach” (21), Cheney questions the “legitimacy” of the “radical skepticism of our time” in order to suggest that, from professors’ research and classroom activities to students’ social and personal lives, “the range of permitted thought and expression is narrowing” (86). Depending primarily on anecdotal recollection and narration of episodes at various campuses across the country, Cheney’s rhetorical method seeks above all else to demonstrate by exhaustion “how discredited ideas like truth and objectivity have become” in today’s academy (96-97). Writing out of a history “replete with instances of injustice” (135), Cheney advocates a rejection of “postmodern thinking,” which, she writes, “does not withstand logical analysis very well” (180). Insofar as “postmodern thought” (191) invites questions about the future of America as a democratic nation, a

rejection of such thought ought to salvage this future. Cheney warns that “going against the grain” (196) of prevailing postmodern relativism “requires effort”—but it is vitally necessary for “determin[ing] whether we survive” (206) as a country.

Deresiewicz, William. *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*. Free Press, 2014. “College is imperfect even in the best of situations” (200), Deresiewicz writes; imagine how bad it is when conditions are less than optimal. Condemning the current system of American higher education as a mass exercise in “credentialism” (16), Deresiewicz argues that the carrot motivating students in the past thirty to fifty years—namely that “the purpose of life [has] become the accumulation of gold stars” (16)—has created a population of unhappy and unsatisfied but nonetheless “excellent sheep,” animals whose sole motivation has largely been an exercise in developing empty achievement, the opposite of productive education. And it’s not just bad that college graduates have for nearly two generations been churned out along these lines. No, Deresiewicz argues, the real tragedy is that this new iteration of the American university does little more than “reproduc[e] the class system” (205) the country largely sought, in the early and mid-twentieth century, to overcome. Deresiewicz’s cultural history, then, comes to two conclusions: first, an encomium to the humanities practiced properly, with space for thought and good thinking; and second, in a damning call for economic reform. In order to “rethink, reform, and reverse the entire project of elite education” (7), we have to abandon meritocracy the same way we abandoned aristocracy. In the end, Deresiewicz concludes, “it’s time to try democracy” (242).

D’Souza, Dinesh. *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*. Free Press, 1991. Universities, D’Souza maintains, “are a leading indicator” of society’s priorities

(14). Students, however, are not their “prime movers.” Rather, responsibility lies with those who “make the fundamental decisions that change the basic structure and atmosphere of the university” (19). As these “leading indicator[s],” universities have the capacity to “magnify the lurid biogry, intolerance, and balkanization of campus life” (230) and export it to “broader culture.” Tracing this thesis through events at paradigm campuses across the country (Berkeley, Stanford, Howard, Michigan, Duke, and Harvard), D’Souza concludes that “the victim’s revolution” (17) unfolding across the nation’s campuses spells the demise of liberal education: instead of meeting students’ “need[s] for all-round development” (229), universities furnish instead “its diametrical opposite, [namely] an education in close-mindedness and intolerance, which is to say, [an] illiberal education.” Furthermore, those minorities to whom institutions claim to pay special attention are, in the end, the most underserved subsection of the student population—and this, D’Souza writes, compounds the ironic wrong: these students are “thus [...] particularly disillusioned when they leave empty-handed” (230). D’Souza ends his diagnosis by proposing three antidotes to this “victim’s revolution”: revise affirmative action criteria; refuse recognition to minority- or identity-based student groups; and establish a list of common texts, including non-Western texts when “relevant” (254), for collective freshman study.

Kimball, Roger. *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education*. Harper & Row, 1990. Kimball locates the demise of the university within the “departments of English, French, and comparative literature” (xii), arguing that the “arcane, pseudophilosophical jargon and radical sentiment[s]” (76) of prevailing academic discourse in today’s academy demonstrate a “large-scale shift away from a concern with



the aesthetic substance of art” (87), broadly conceived. Such a “shift” of attention within the academy has at once lowered standards while, at the same time, effected a dramatic change in popular consciousness. Kimball is careful always to locate the origins of this “shift” within English and departments adjacent to it: “the tenets, attitudes, and techniques of deconstruction,” the prime practice Kimball denounces as a particularly depraved example of the academy’s downfall, “have long since metastasized from their home in departments of English and comparative literature” (117). The blame, Kimball concludes, lies squarely with “the children of the sixties” (166), who, thirty years after their radical anti-establishment sentiments were formed, have themselves sedimented into a new establishment, “the establishment of tenured radicals” to which his title refers (189). This is “the real crisis in the humanities,” he writes in his final chapter: “Instead of worrying about literature” (187), humanism’s heirs denounce their own thrones—good riddance, says Kimball.

Kipnis, Laura. *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus*. Harper, 2017. Writing as an avowed “left-wing feminist” (1), Kipnis concludes that today’s campus culture has been overtaken by a kind of “sexual suspicion” (86) that “sentimentaliz[es]” (173) women in a way that contradicts the advancements of a century of feminism. By tracing her Northwestern colleague Peter Ludlow’s journey through their university’s sexual assault and harassment reporting system, Kipnis argues that the gross overreaching application of Title IX regulations has led to a nationwide compromising of free speech: “What’s the point of having a freedom you’re afraid to use?” (157), Kipnis questions after recalling the many conversations she’s had with colleagues who limit the content they teach based on fears of being reported for Title IX violations. The “learned

compliance of heterosexual femininity” (220) that undergirds the “sexual suspicion [that] overtook campus” (86) culture “at some point in the last five or ten years [since 2007 or 2012, in other words],” Kipnis argues, has amounted to the “supplant[ing]” (42) of “education” by “bureaucracy,” and the “replace[ment]” of “thinking” by mere “slogans.” Kipnis is keen to advocate for a “grown-up feminism, one that recognizes” (219) the role of female deference to traditional roles without—carefully—the charge of “victim blaming” that’s often used to foreclose such frank discussions.

Sokal, Alan and Jean Bricmont. *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals’ Abuse of Science*. Picador, 1998. Following the release of Sokal’s controversial *Social Text* article written to demonstrate the vapidness of needless jargon and the ornate shallows of prevailing humanistic inquiry, Sokal and Bricmont’s book argues that “postmodernism” is a “marginal phenomenon” of academic “irrationalism” that nonetheless ought to be held to account for the “intellectual posturing and dishonesty” they view as rampant throughout French and Anglophone academia. By surveying the big names in post-1945 so-called “theory” such as Lacan, Kristeva, Latour, Deleuze and Guattari, and others, Sokal and Bricmont, both physicists, conclude that the exportation of scientific jargon into the humanities usually (though not always) amounts at best to harmless misinterpretation and at worst to damaging destruction—of, for example, “everything the feminist movement has fought for during the last three decades” (123). In the end, “Postmodernism has three principal negative effects: a waste of time in the human sciences, a cultural confusion that favors obscurantism, and a weakening of the political left” (206). “The cultural consequences of relativism” (207), taken together, amount to a dangerous social problem: “the adverse effect that abandoning clear thinking and clear

writing has” a demonstrably negative effect “on teaching and culture” (206). Their concluding “dream” (211) envisions “the emergence of an intellectual culture” that is at once reasoned and rigorous while resisting the needless “dogmati[sm]” of the type their survey exposes.

### **Bibliography B: The Academic’s List**

Ellis, John M. *Against Deconstruction*. Princeton, 1989. About halfway through this

thoroughgoing monograph, Ellis makes an aside that might well serve as this book’s estimation of deconstruction as a whole: “This is a dubious gloss” (105), he writes. Just as such a “gloss” is not particularly useful beyond itself, so too is deconstruction itself not very useful. Ellis argues this by questioning its premises, warrants, conclusions, and even its tone. Christening Derrida as a “latecomer” (37) so insufficiently well-versed in preceding philosophy of language that his resistance to and self-placement against Saussure amounts to nothing less than “a wholesale garbling” (62), Ellis maintains that deconstruction as practiced by Derrida and his heirs fails not only to withstand direct criticism but also—and here’s the real failing, says Ellis—clearly to state “what it is that is [so] revolutionary about it” (88). This is its more fatal failure: the statement “‘all interpretation is misinterpretation’ is neither a valid nor an invalid position at all,” Ellis writes, because “it merely creates the illusion of a position” (112) where, in fact, there is none. This posturing “creates a sense of the excitement of intellectual progress” (141) without actually making any “progress” at all. In the end, Ellis concludes that deconstruction, even when done well, thus amounts to little more than mere performance.

Felski, Rita. *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago UP, 2015. Deliberately situating her study at the forked pathway that constitutes the “legitimation crisis” (5) facing “literary studies,” Felski takes up Paul Ricoeur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion” to fashion an argument that doesn’t decide on one particular stream of literary theory but, rather, speculates on the momentum of criticism more generally. Felski’s fixation on “the allure of suspicion” (36) is primarily an affective one, and this introduction of the somatics of critique constitutes Felski’s intervention: “Once we acknowledge that suspicious interpretation is not only thought-driven but also pleasure-driven” (116), Felski writes, we’re “free[d] [...] up to try out other styles of criticism, to explore ways of reading less invested in inspection, interrogation, and the pursuit of the guilty.” Drawing rather “liber[ally]” (183) on Latour, Felski ends her study by proposing that, among other things, texts can themselves be thought of as nonhuman actors (154), a conclusion that depends on her earlier figuration of “reading” as “not just a cognitive activity but an embodied mode of attentiveness” (176). This necessarily draws us into the realm of the social: “literature’s singularity and its sociability are intertwined rather than opposed.” Felski’s book, then, is important not just for methodological purposes but disciplinary ones too: “the aim is no longer to diminish or subtract” (185) the social text, and the texts of the social. Rather, it’s “to amplify their reality.”

Hofstadter, Richard. *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. Vintage, 1966. Hofstadter’s Pulitzer-winning cultural history of American intellectualism argues that “the case against intellect is founded upon a set of fictional and wholly abstract antagonisms” (45) that largely fall within two categories: “evangelicalism and primitivism” (49), which have jointly “helped to plant anti-intellectualism at the roots of American consciousness.”

“The relationship between intellect and power was not a problem” (145) in the early days of the republic, Hofstadter argues, because “the leaders *were* the intellectuals” (emphasis in original). But as time went on, and the status of the gentleman declined, midcentury political reformers birthed early twentieth-century educational reformers such as Dewey, whose ideas, Hofstadter argues, were later re- or misinterpreted to support the country’s anti-intellectualist sentiments. The “cult of alienation” (420) that has resulted from this long historical development contributes to a fatal mandating of the intellectual’s position as “the only stance productive of artistic creativity or social insight or moral probity.” Anti-intellectualism is thus deeply rooted in the country’s “democratic institutions and [its] egalitarian sentiments” (407). And higher education to a large extent “turn[s] out experts who are not intellectuals or men of culture at all” (428), which means that the country as a whole must, Hofstadter concludes, return to an embrace of more variegated forms of intellectualism (432).

McGurl, Mark. *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*. Harvard, 2009. In his landmark study of the “systematic coupling [...] of art”—creative writing—“and institution” (4), McGurl argues that what he calls “the autopoietic process” (18), “the act of authorship in the Program Era,” has remained largely unaddressed by contemporary scholarship. Even as the rise of subdisciplines such as critical university studies obliges book-length institutional studies, McGurl’s is notable for its delicate handling of a topic situated at a “close range” (24). Above all, creative writing programs manifest an exercise of disciplinary power over unbounded aesthetic output: “the postwar creative writing program was founded on the assumption that artists are forged in the imposition of these institutional constraints upon unfettered creativity” (131). Close

reading mid- and late century American fiction with an eye towards the ways postwar literary production was disciplined and, to a great extent, determined by rapidly-growing creative writing programs, McGurl develops a compelling contribution to “influence studies” (321). He concludes that “the Program Era is the simultaneous product and occasion” (398) of a clearly American “want to study creative writing in school” (397). In the end, McGurl shows MFA programs have had a quiet but widespread influence not just on English departments in general but—more importantly—on American fiction just as well.

Shields, Jon A. and Joshua M. Dunn, Sr. *Passing on the Right: Conservative Professors in the Progressive University*. This careful sociology of conservative professors within the humanities and social sciences, among whom Shields and Dunn classify themselves (15), is guided by the wise assumption that “progressive academics cannot have it both ways: They cannot lend their credentials to political crusades *and* expect to be treated like a nonpartisan institution floating above a factionalized political world” (9, emphasis in original). Their study’s surveys suggest that conservative academics thrive, albeit in small numbers, within the university, and that these professors’ views don’t deviate all that much from the mainstream conservative views of the voting public. They largely rely on the “closet” metaphor because “some of the conservatives [they] interviewed actually identify with the gay experience” (85) insofar as self-disclosure, particularly among non-tenured or non-tenure-track instructors, might jeopardize promotion decisions, especially within disciplines such as English or philosophy. “The problem is not progressivism,” their account argues (185). Rather, the problem “is the absence of conservatives from many important domains of inquiry.” Their final chapter, which considers the question of

affirmative action for conservatives, demonstrates a paradox within mainstream liberalism: “either it must aim to improve the representation of conservatives” or “abandon affirmative action programs for *all* underrepresented groups,” an action that would amount to “the triumph of neoconservatism” (202, emphasis in original).

Watkins, Evan. *Work Time: English Departments and the Circulation of Cultural Value*. Sanford

UP, 1989. Writing out of Gramsci’s call for a new literature “root[ed] in the humus of popular culture” (Gramsci qtd. Watkins 44), Watkins argues that late-stage capitalism has fixed the English department not as an origin of culture but rather as a gateway through which culture flows: “The primary process of circulation” of cultural products “involves neither what circulates from English nor what circulates in English, but *who* is circulated *to* English” (24, emphases in original). The English department’s situation as this nexus or conduit makes it especially well positioned to generate and determine cultural shifts in wider society. Debates over the canon or methodologies, Watkins argues, are necessarily peripheral to what might be the English department’s unique position: “one common denominator” for most people “is passage through the discipline of English on the way” to other careers and social positions (272). This is precisely the English department’s central importance to culture and society, so let’s take care to attend to it.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> (Some material, including direct quotations and surrounding material, from this paragraph—and only this paragraph—has been adapted from work previously submitted to John Brenkman’s Fall 2017 Critical Theory course.)

<sup>2</sup> But let me be clear and explicit: I’m not saying it’s warranted. I’m saying, rather, if it *were* warranted, here’s a line of inquiry that might be worth pursuing.

<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, it could be argued that a collapse of “the academic” view into “the liberal” one (or vice versa) is ill-founded and counterproductive; space constrains explanation of such an equation. While a text on my second list, Shield and Dunn’s *Passing on the Right*, at once substantiates and interrogates this collapsing assumption in a finer grain, let it suffice for this project’s purposes here that the views are roughly the same.

<sup>4</sup> For arguments contesting the assumption undergirding the latter part of this sentence (i.e., that the university as we know it ought to be preserved), see (among others): Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira’s collection, *The Imperial University*; Roderick A. Ferguson’s *The Reorder of Things*; Gary Hall’s *Uberfication of the University*; Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s *Undercommons*; and la paperson’s *A Third University Is Possible*.

<sup>5</sup> See note 4 on page 8 of Bibliography A’s *Anti-Intellectualism*.

<sup>6</sup> (or misread)



## Other Works Cited in Annotated Bibliography Materials

Corey, Elizabeth. "The University Has No Purpose." *The Chronicle Review*, 22 April 2018.

Chatterjee, Piya, and Sunaina Maira. *The Imperial University*. Minnesota, 2014.

Ferguson, Roderick. A. *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*. Minnesota, 2012.

Hall, Gary. *The Uberfication of the University*. Minnesota, 2016.

Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. Wivenhoe, 2013.

la paperson. *A Third University Is Possible*. Minnesota, 2017.

Mac Donald, Heather. Manhattan Institute Lecture, Young Leaders Circle Forum, 4 October 2017, Penn Club, New York, NY. Keynote Address.

---. "The True Purpose of the University." *City Journal* 27.2 (Spring 2017): 4-9.

### **Teaching Statement**

In high school, I had an economics teacher who often said to us: “It’s my job to put you in front of your own stupidity so you can learn to overcome it.” Direct but (admittedly) abrasive, this phrase has remained the guiding ethos of my own teaching practice. My goal as an instructor is twofold: (1) to facilitate the acquisition of certain fundamentals of writing and analysis so that (2) students can learn to explore their own compelling thoughts and ideas.

Writing good analyses of any text, whether literary, polemical, or otherwise, requires practice. And writing, like any other skill, is learnable—but only through concrete practice. Mastery or near-mastery comes after a lifetime of habitual writing and thinking; in the absence of this long time, regular practice is the next best way to hone one’s writerly voice.

The foundation of my teaching ethics rests mostly on my assignation of an exercise I found to be most helpful during my days as an undergraduate: the weekly seminar paper. I require students in all classes I teach to submit these papers of roughly 500 words (one single-spaced, 12-point Times New Roman page of writing) on Sunday evenings via email on some—read: any—aspect of the week’s readings. More than merely satisfying my rather elementary concern that students demonstrate their thorough and thoughtful reading of the assigned materials, this space allows students to write about any element of the texts on the docket.

The essay, at least in practical academia, is a form with a thesis that’s backed up by small points of argumentation; structuring my courses in this way allows students to become intimately comfortable with their own analytical voices. I’ve found—both in my own writing and when leading a classroom—that students having trouble with larger assignments can articulate a thesis but encounter difficulty when asked to explain how their examples work locally. Inverting the traditional essay in this way (by having lots of little seminar assignments) frees students up to

hone these tightly local manoeuvres without having the burden of making them fit some overarching argument in a more sustained paper. Low-stakes and frequent, these weekly grounds require that students throw concrete, discrete, and—most importantly—well-reasoned local analyses onto paper.

Structuring the semester in this way allows two crucial things to happen. First, students have worked through a lot of different little ideas throughout the semester by the time longer papers loom large: this means that they already have a feeling for what kind of evidence will work and what kind of points are interesting to make—and what kinds of texts might be less amenable to certain arguments. Second, students are confident that they can execute what is usually the most daunting step of the essay process: textual analysis through close reading. This confidence frees students' anxieties up for higher-level concerns, such as interpreting the thesis in the context of other concerns. After 6,000 words spread across twelve seminar papers, a final paper's required 3,000-4,000 words feels much more approachable; having learned to think in 500-word chunks, students often feel that longer space is a luxury, not a burden.

Rather usefully, these seminar papers also fill classroom time quite nicely. Not only can exceptionally good papers be distributed (with student permission, of course) to demonstrate clear and precise thinking, they can also be used to spur discussion. It's often the case that two students have written about the same or about very similar things, an overlap that frequently draws my own attention as an instructor away from what I think is significant to what students think is significant. This is a kind of student-inflected pedagogy that is useful to direct discussion and empower students themselves: as miniature experts on, say, *Eugenides'* variation of sentence length depending on content of a character's speech, they can speak with authority—and direct classmates to text-based evidence, which opens up room for disputation and alternate readings.

Most importantly, however, these weekly seminar papers open up students to their own writing. The drafting process is always one of discovery and self-discovery. And writing, for obvious reasons, is not a particularly social activity. Usually, we write in private, then convene and converse, and then write more in private. The seminar paper approach puts me in outside conversation with my students—and puts them in conversation with their own past selves. The self-altering and self-revising nature of the type of multi-media conversations my reliance on this method fosters allows for the possibility of low-stakes error. But it also creates more “teachable moments”: not only is my own thinking on a text refreshed and shaken (but productively!), but students, empowered with this newfound comfortability and confidence from frequent required formal writing assignments, can learn to teach themselves. Overcoming difficulties—in petty classroom argumentation or more weighty contexts—is the single most important skill I can strive to impart. In short, I aim to take more from the latter half of my economics teacher’s statement, as that is how I can best serve my students.

Lehman College, Fall 2018  
ENG 355: Special Topics in Literature I

Instructor: XXX  
XXX@lehman.cuny.edu  
office hours by appointment

### Commentaries

W/F 10:00 – 11:15 a.m.  
Carman Hall, Room XXX

*But what do you do when you have no stories of your own?* (*S.*, 146)  
*It is the commentator who has the last word.* (*Pale Fire*, 29)  
*My sense is that this is essentially a visual culture.* (*Postmodernism*, 299)

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course will read an unusual subgenre of fiction: texts that read other texts explicitly. In his landmark *Postmodernism*, Frederic Jameson notes that postmodern culture is “essentially a visual [one].” Taking Jameson’s dictum to heart, we will read modern and post-modern works of varying popularity written in the American context to better understand allusion and literary allusion and covert reference in this “essentially visual” time.

### **COURSE MATERIALS**

Students are required to purchase new editions of Abrams and Dorst’s *S.* This book has interactive components, some of which are loose attachments and other assorted accoutrements inserted strategically between pages. **Do not order library or secondhand copies of this book; you must order a new sleeved and sealed copy.** Students can, however, purchase, rent, borrow, or otherwise acquire print or paginated PDF editions of the following books, which will supplement supplied PDF scans:

1. J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst, *S.* Mulholland, 2013. ISBN: 978-0316201643. **(You must order a new sleeved and sealed hard copy of this book—see above!)**
2. Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*. Trans. Richard Howard for Hill and Wang, 2010. ISBN: 978-0374532314.
3. Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot: A Novel*. Picador reprint, 2012. ISBN: 978-1250014764.
4. Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*. Vintage reprint, 1989. ISBN: 978-0679723424.

I’ll supply scans for the rest of the readings via the course Blackboard site. Please take care to acquire the versions of the print or same-paginated digital editions of the books listed above; pagination often varies among editions and reprintings, and it makes for easier in-class reference if everyone’s on the same page—literally.

### **FINAL COURSE GRADES AND GRADING SYSTEM**

Final course grades will be calculated according to the following outline:

participation	10%
weekly seminar papers	40%
annotated bibliography	10%
paper presentation	10%
final paper	30%

Final course grades are represented on the transcript as single letter grades. At the end of the course, students will be assigned a letter grade according to the quality of the work they've completed throughout the semester calculated by plugging points earned into the above final course grade outline. **With the exception of seminar papers, which are graded on a ten-point scale (see below), all assignments will receive a percentage that corresponds to a letter grade.** These grades correspond as follows:

A+	97-100	<i>this is a perfect demonstration of extraordinary work</i>
A	93-96	<i>exceptional quality</i>
A-	90-92	<i>nearly exceptional, but with some minor flaws</i>
B+	87-89	<i>good quality that's almost exceptional</i>
B	83-86	<i>good quality</i>
B-	80-82	<i>fair quality</i>
C+	77-79	<i>fair quality dulled by flaws</i>
C	73-76	<i>acceptable quality</i>
C-	70-72	<i>acceptable quality dulled by flaws</i>
D	60-69	<i>nearly unacceptable quality, marred by flaws</i>
F	<59	<i>unacceptable quality</i>

I've provided the italicized annotations to the right of each grade tier to give you a better idea of what qualifies as "A" work, "B" work, and so on. My use of the term "flaws" should be read ecumenically: there are many things that might constitute a "flaw," including (but not limited to) anything that might have been caught by proofreading (such as typos, formatting mistakes, unfinished sentences, and the like), stylistic features that impede understanding, unclear wording, confused ideas, contradictions, etc.

### ***SEMINAR PAPERS***

Every **Sunday by 5 p.m.**, you're required to submit **via email** a **one-page single-spaced** seminar paper reflecting on the upcoming week's readings. Attend to timestamps and formatting requirements because **late submissions will not be accepted for credit**, though I encourage you to submit seminar papers even if they come after the 5:00 p.m. deadline. In addition to evidencing your thoroughgoing engagement with course materials, these seminar papers are also fertile ground for testing out final paper ideas. Accordingly, you should feel encouraged to submit any materials you have by the 5:00 p.m. deadline for credit, even if it's a partial draft—and submit the full draft when you've finished it later that night. Getting something in is better than getting nothing in. Regarding these papers' content: you can write whatever you want about the readings for the upcoming week. Possible topics include but are not limited to:

- A question that the text asks but doesn't answer
- A question that the text should have asked and/or answered
- Something that bothers you
- Nonstandard word usage and the implications of reading that word differently (the *Oxford English Dictionary* is a useful resource in this regard: its descriptive histories of words and careful etymologies can help tease out different senses and definitions)
- What an author gets wrong
- What an author gets right
- How a certain literary device or stylistic feature works in context
- How this text might relate to another text
- Anything your heart desires

- Really, I mean *anything*
- (As long as it's thoughtful and substantial)

These seminar papers will be **graded on a 10-point scale**. Seminar papers ought to demonstrate not just that you've done that week's readings but also that you've really thought about what you've read. Manipulating a text—performing an argument or making a point with it—requires that you make something of its mechanics. Understanding a text's internal mechanics might take two or three readings; accordingly, use this space of roughly 500 words to slow down and tease out how a single textual gear works in the grand context of the work's machine structure.

### ***ATTENDANCE***

This is an upper-level literature course. I won't take formal attendance, because we're not children, and you should know by now to come to class. Chronic lateness may merit a word after class regarding responsible and professional student conduct. Chronic absences may merit a similar word regarding sufficient progress and standing within the course. If I record that you've been absent from more than three classes without sufficient advance notification prior to the start of class, your participation grade will be halved. Extenuating circumstances will be considered fairly and on a case-by-case basis; if you think you might be late, just shoot me an email as soon as possible letting me know. Because this course is a seminar, "material" means not just "what's listed on the syllabus" but also—and here's the rub—"the in-class conversations about what's listed on the syllabus." If you do happen to miss class, don't ask me to tell you what you've missed. Class discussion can't be "made up." Just come to class and you'll be fine.

### ***CLASSROOM CONDUCT***

Lest I need to repeat the fact that this is an upper-level literature course, I'll just say here that you ought by now to know how to behave in an advanced seminar. I won't actively police classroom culture, mostly because you should know how to govern your own comments and decorum. We'll be discussing ideas and evidence for these ideas; when I remark that this classroom is a "safe space," I mean not to suggest that we'll avoid discussions of potentially disturbing things but rather to encourage "safe" approaches to controversial topics. When in doubt, couch your more controversial comments or opinions in "devil's advocate" terms. Always speak in good faith; this allows the classroom to give speakers the benefit of the doubt. This does not, however, mean that unproductive comments—racist, sexist, classist, homophobic remarks, among others—or ad hominem attacks will be tolerated. You'd be wise to stop making certain comments to uphold common decency standards if someone in the room asks you not to make those comments; if you can't stop yourself from making unproductive or mala fide comments, you'll be asked immediately to leave. If you feel a classmate has made a remark that makes you uncomfortable but you don't feel comfortable expressing this in public, I'm always open to discussing classroom culture in private during office hours or at another scheduled time.

### ***ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AND PLAGIARISM POLICIES***

The "Academic Integrity" section of the 2017-2019 Undergraduate Bulletin states the following: "Academic dishonesty is prohibited in The City University of New York. Penalties for academic dishonesty include academic sanctions, such as failing or otherwise reduced grades, and/or disciplinary sanctions, including suspension or expulsion." All violations of the College's Academic Integrity policy will be reported to the Department and the College's Academic Integrity Officer. Any assignment submitted that violates the letter or spirit of the Academic

Integrity guidelines listed in the Bulletin will receive an automatic zero. Students will not have the option to revise and resubmit any assignment failed on these grounds. If this sounds harsh, that's because it is. For more detailed information on definitions and examples of academic dishonesty, including cheating, plagiarism, obtaining unfair advantage, and falsification of records and documents, please refer to the "Academic Integrity" section of the Undergraduate Bulletin.

### ***ACCOMMODATING DISABILITIES***

Lehman College is committed to providing access to all programs and curricula to all students. Students with disabilities who may require special considerations should register with the Office of Student Disability Services in order to submit official paperwork to the instructor. For more information, contact the Office of Student Disability Services, Shuster Hall, Room 238, 718-960-8441. For detailed information on services and resources, visit <http://www.lehman.edu/student-disability-services/> or email [disability.services@lehman.cuny.edu](mailto:disability.services@lehman.cuny.edu).

### ***TUTORING AND SUPPORT SERVICES***

Lehman College's Instructional Support Services Program (ISSP) is home of the Academic Center for Excellence (ACE) and Science Learning Center (SLC). Both offer students an array of activities and services designed to support classroom learning. Open to students at any level, there are individual, small group, and/or workshop sessions designed to improve "proficiency in writing, reading, research, and particular academic subject areas. Computer-assisted writing/language tutorial programs are also available," as well as individual tutors, workshops and tutors. To obtain more information about the ACE and SLC, visit Old Gym, Room 205, or <http://www.lehman.edu/academics/instructional-support-services/humanities-tutoring.php>. ACE can be reached at 718-960-8175, and SLC at 718-960-7707. Regular tutoring hours during the semester are: Monday through Thursday, 10:00 a.m. – 7:00 p.m., and Saturday 10:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. Library Tutors, who offer help with Library resources and computers, are also available in the Library.

### ***TECHNOLOGY AND BLACKBOARD INFORMATION***

Outside of class, I'll communicate with you via email. ***This means you have to check your email.*** At the very least, you should be logging onto your Lehman email accounts once per week to send me your seminar papers. I might, however, email you about urgent matters more frequently, so ***check your email.*** Let me repeat: ***check your email.*** Not checking your Lehman email account—or, for that matter, not being in class—is not an acceptable excuse for ignorance about an assignment or course change, because all assignment or course changes will be made either verbally in class or in writing via email. So ***check your email.*** All assignments will be uploaded to the course Blackboard site. So check that too.

### ***CALENDAR OF ASSIGNMENTS***

29 August	syllabus day
31 August	Bloom, excerpts from <i>The Anxiety of Influence</i> (PDF in BB) Jameson, excerpts from <i>Postmodernism</i> (PDF in BB)
2 September	<b><i>***seminar paper 1 due at 5:00 p.m. via email***</i></b>
5 September	<b><i>no class (classes follow Monday schedule)</i></b>



7 September	Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the <i>Quixote</i> " (PDF in BB) Genette, excerpts from <i>Palimpsests</i> ("Pseudosummary in Borges," 251-54; "Unamuno, author of <i>Quixote</i> ," 317-24) (PDF in BB)
9 September	***seminar paper 2 due at 5:00 p.m via email***
12 September	Milton, "Lycidas" (PDF in BB)
14 September	Berryman, "Wash Far Away" (PDF in BB)
16 September	***seminar paper 3 due at 5:00 p.m via email***
19 September	<b>no class (no classes scheduled)</b>
21 September	Barthes, <i>A Lover's Discourse</i>
23 September	***seminar paper 4 due at 5:00 p.m via email***
26 September	Barthes, <i>A Lover's Discourse</i>
28 September	Eugenides, <i>The Marriage Plot</i>
30 September	***seminar paper 5 due at 5:00 p.m via email***
3 October	Eugenides, <i>The Marriage Plot</i>
5 October	Eugenides, <i>The Marriage Plot</i>
7 October	***seminar paper 6 due at 5:00 p.m via email***
10 October	Eugenides, <i>The Marriage Plot</i>
12 October	Eugenides, <i>The Marriage Plot</i>
14 October	***seminar paper 7 due at 5:00 p.m via email***
17 October	Nabokov, <i>Pale Fire</i> : Foreword (1-29), Index (305-15) and Cantos 1 and 2 (33-51)
19 October	Nabokov, <i>Pale Fire</i> : Cantos 3 and 4 (52-69)
21 October	***seminar paper 8 due at 5:00 p.m via email***
24 October	Nabokov, <i>Pale Fire</i> : Commentary on lines 1-166 (73-147)
26 October	Nabokov, <i>Pale Fire</i> : Commentary on lines 167-356 (148-93)
28 October	***seminar paper 9 due at 5:00 p.m via email***
31 October	Nabokov, <i>Pale Fire</i> : Commentary on lines 357-834 (193-262)
2 November	Nabokov, <i>Pale Fire</i> : Commentary on lines 835-999 (263-301)
4 November	***seminar paper 10 due at 5:00 p.m via email*** <b>(N.B. THE TIME CHANGE—END OF DST)</b>
7 November	Abrams and Dorst, <i>S.</i> : prefatory materials through Chapter 2 (through 68)
9 November	Abrams and Dorst, <i>S.</i> : Chapter 3 (69-110)
11 November	***seminar paper 11 due at 5:00 p.m via email***
14 November	Abrams and Dorst, <i>S.</i> : Chapters 4 and 5 (111-201)
16 November	Abrams and Dorst, <i>S.</i> : Chapter 6 (203-58)

- 18 November \*\*\*seminar paper 12 due at 5:00 p.m via email\*\*\*  
**(N.B. THAT THIS IS THE FINAL SEMINAR PAPER)**
- 21 November Abrams and Dorst, S.: Chapter 7 and Interlude (259-330)  
23 November **no class (college closed for Thanksgiving Holiday)**
- 28 November Abrams and Dorst, S.: Chapters 8 and 9 (331-413)  
\*\*\*annotated bibliographies due\*\*\*  
**(HARD COPIES HANDED IN AT THE BEGINNING OF CLASS)**
- 30 November Abrams and Dorst, S.: Chapter 10 (414-57)
- 5 December *paper presentations*  
7 December *paper presentations*
- 12 December *paper presentations*

**\*\*\*HARD COPIES OF PAPER PRESENTATIONS DUE AT THE BEGINNING OF CLASS\*\*\***

**\*\*\*FINAL PAPERS DUE FRIDAY, DECEMBER 21 AT 5:00 PM VIA EMAIL\*\*\***

### **Analytical Explanation of "Lycidas"**

This course, titled (rather broadly) "Commentaries," is a literature seminar designed for upper-level undergraduates. Following some orienting prefatory materials based on John Berryman's short story "Wash Far Away," which makes concerted reference to John Milton's "Lycidas," itself a poem about death and influence, and on Jorge Louis Borges' "Pierre Menard," a text overtly concerned with authorship, the course surveys four major texts: Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Marriage Plot*, Roland Barthes' *Lover's Discourse*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, and J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst's *S*.

The aim of the course is not (necessarily) to historicize commentary and influence—it's not, in other words, to trace how literary influence changes shape throughout time. The aim, rather, is to investigate different forms of commentary and influence. Topologizing commentary in this way—more formally than historically—is certainly not a novel way of approaching American post-modernism. But what happens when we have texts that comment on other texts as formal measures?

Subtending this question is a rather more personal interest in postmodernism's visual literatures. In his landmark *Postmodernism*, Frederic Jameson writes that postmodern society is "essentially a visual culture" (299). Having read *Pale Fire*, *S*, and *The Marriage Plot*—a rather disparate group of works!—for the first time in the same year, and holding Jameson's statement freshly to heart, I wondered: what would it be like to think of these works, some (most) of which are rarely read in academic settings, let alone undergraduate settings, as part of the same American postwar conversation on influence and reference?

What follows is a thickened version of a classroom lecture that also serves as an example close reading of an enjambment in "Lycidas," which this course surveys in its early weeks in the

context of the Berryman story. With the course's background focus on the visual—and thus spatial—elements of postmodern literature, and given that the course is, after all, an upper-level literature seminar, which carries the usual demand to read closely, I've elected to linger with Milton's enjambments to warm students (and myself) up to thinking about language and influence on a local level. In teaching this moment in the text, we would not only discuss the mechanics of a precise poetic choice but also mention its own internal points of reference and (self-)commentary, towards which the closing lines of the below close reading gesture.

Line 70 reads, "Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise," suggesting that "the clear [as in pure, from the Latin *clarus*] spirit" "raise[s]" the "spur," "Fame." But the last word can be read two ways: does "raise" here mean "lift up" or "tear down," as in "raze" (see OED for alternate spelling histories)? Considered with the second sense ("raze," just spelled differently), the line's meaning changes: this "clear spirit" now tears down that "spur," "Fame." Instead of using the promise of Fame to "spur" something (itself, perhaps?) on ("rais[ing] it as if to drive into a flank), "the clear spirit" destroys the encouraging effect of ("raise[s]") a future Fame. Added to its following two lines (71-72), however, the meaning changes yet again, clarifying itself. "Fame" is now "the spur" that makes "the clear spirit" want to rise above ("raise" itself) and "scorn delights," sacrificing pleasure so that it might instead "live laborious days."

The intervening parenthetical remark further separates the clearest and final meaning from the triplet's (it would not be a couplet, would it? because the middle line separates the rhyming "raise" and "days") original suggestion, elongating the enjambment, and complicates the final meaning of the three-line set. Milton nods to Tacitus when he encloses in parentheses this modifying afterthought: "That last infirmity of the noble mind." "That last infirmity," we can assume (his words are a restatement of those of Tacitus, who writes, "Even in the case of wise

*Analytical Explanation of "Lycidas"*

men the desire for glory is last cut off"), modifies "Fame" of the preceding line, and "the noble mind" is simply another way of mentioning "the clear spirit," also from the line above. To write "and strictly meditate the thankless muse" (66), who simply cannot alleviate or delay the oncoming pains of "the blind Fury with th' abhorréd shears," Atropos, does not allow one to transcend the bounds of a "thin-spun life" (76).

Apollo arrives, then, to reinforce this conclusion: "Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil," he says (78); it "lives and spreads aloft [only] by those pure eyes,/And perfect witness of all-judging Jove" (81-82) (note the subtle enjambment here, though it has a quieter and different effect). The message of the parenthetical aside becomes prescient and self-critical, suggesting that even "the wise man" (in the words of Tacitus) is often lead astray by the allure of the breed of Fame "that grows on mortal soil"; the mind is not fully "clear," wholly "noble," until it trains itself to overlook the earthly difference between undying renown and anonymous obscurity and instead work (in a vaguely Aristotelian, knowledge-to-enrich-the-soul fashion) towards a higher, holier "meed" (84).

The tone of this portion of the stichic poem modulates several times until finally settling into Apollo's placid and sure emendations, and in this way mirrors the larger work's tonal shape. Our mourning speaker's introductory "Alas!" is the final exclamation in a string of lamentations: the sections before it all begin in some despairing statement, and all those after have brighter beginnings. Almost frantic, he begins by asking forgiveness of the laurels and myrtles and help of the muses to amplify his sorrows; he then briefly abandons his apostrophic petitions of floral and celestial bodies, turning towards a description of the pair's happier moments, but quickly reassumes his former, panicking voice. The portion immediately preceding the pivotal one assigns blame then hopelessly redacts it, sobbing, "Had ye been there—for what could that have

*Analytical Explanation of "Lycidas"*

done?" (57). Briefly echoing the hopeless tone preceding it, the pivotal portion begins, "Alas!" and wonders if these "homely" verses are worthless. This hopelessness continues until the three-line enjambed statement, which more seriously considers his worth and asks a sobering question that Apollo answers in even tones. The finality of the god's words encourage our mourning speaker towards a surer conclusion: "Weep no more, woeful shepherds, weep no more,/For Lycidas your sorrow is not dead" (165-66), reminding himself that though "Lycidas [is] sunk low," he is "mounted high" (172), and finally reorienting himself towards a "tomorrow" with "fresh woods, and pastures new" (193).

Other Works Cited in Syllabus Materials

Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke  
Up, 1991.

Milton, John. "Lycidas." *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, eds. William  
Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon. New York: Modern Library, 2007. 99-  
109.