

**English 3501.401 (GSWS3501, COML3501)**  
**Writing and Witnessing**

**Fall 2024**  
**Wednesdays, 3:30pm-6:25pm**  
**CPCW 105 (3809 Walnut St., 1st floor)**

**Professor: Syd Zolf, MFA, PhD**  
**zolfr@writing.upenn.edu**  
**CPCW 208, 3809 Walnut Street**  
**Office hours by appointment** Mondays on Zoom,  
Wednesdays in person before or after class, some  
Tuesday times available too (email me to book)

*Draft as of August 9, 2024. Subject to change.*

## **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

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This course will explore one of the fundamental questions we face as humans: how do we bear witness to ourselves and to the world? How do we live and write with a sense of response-ability to one another? How does our writing grapple with traumatic histories that continue to shape our world and who we are in it? The very word “witnessing” contains a conundrum within it: it means both to give testimony, such as in a court of law, and to bear witness to something beyond understanding, in a spiritual sense. In this class, we will explore both senses of the term “witness” as we study work by a number of writers and thinkers, including Divya Victor, Paul Celan, Layli Long Soldier, Bhanu Kapil, and M. NourbeSe Philip, that wrestles with how to be a witness to oneself and others during a time of ongoing war, colonialism, racial violence, climate change, and other disasters. Students are welcome in this class no matter what stage you are at with writing, and whether you write poetry or prose or plays or make other kinds of art. Regardless of your experience, in this class you’ll be considered an “author,” which in its definition also means a “witness.” We will examine and question what authorship can do in the world, and we will analyze and explore the fine lines among being a witness, a bystander, a participant, a spectator, and an ally. In this class you will critically analyze and write responses to class readings; do writing exercises related to the work we read; and complete (and be workshopped on) a portfolio of creative writing (and art, if you choose) that bears witness to events that matter to you. The class will also include Zoom visits by some writers whose work we will study, including Anthony Cody and Divya Victor.

## **REQUIRED MATERIALS**

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The books listed below are required and available at the Penn Bookstore. Feel free to purchase new or used copies elsewhere. I suggest using [bookshop.org](https://bookshop.org) to purchase from independent booksellers. You can also use [EZ-Borrow, BorrowDirect or Interlibrary loan](#) to find a library copy, because *you need to bring the books to class on the day we will discuss them* (the books are on reserve at Van Pelt so not available to bring to class). Additional required and recommended readings are in the “Files” folder on Canvas and are linked to on each week’s “Assignments” page. They appear in the syllabus followed by [C].

Reading all of the assigned work in this syllabus in advance of class is critical to the success of the course, and students are expected to come to class prepared with written responses and questions to contribute to the collective discussion. Required material is absolutely necessary to read; “recommended” material can be read for further insight into the week’s work. Students are also required to do your own background research on the course writers/texts so you have context for your reading and our discussions.

**Anthony Cody, *Borderland Apocrypha*** (Omnidawn Publishing, 2020, ISBN: 9781632430762)

**Divya Victor, *Curb*** (Nightboat Books, 2021, ISBN9781643620701)

**M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*** (Wesleyan Poetry Series, 2008/2011, ISBN: 9780819571694)

**Bhanu Kapil, *Ban en Banlieue*** (Nightboat Books, 2015, ISBN: 9781937658243)

## REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING

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Students will be graded according to the following course requirements:

- **PARTICIPATION (30%):** Fully engaged participation is crucial to this course. Students are expected to make regular contributions to discussion, including giving oral and written feedback on their peers' writing. You need to come to each class session prepared to ask questions, pose topics for discussion, and respond to what other members of the class have to say. Additional reactions and comments on Canvas are highly encouraged.
- **WEEKLY ASSIGNMENTS & WORKSHOP (35%):** Each Wednesday by 7am, students will post on Canvas a creative exercise and critical response (at least 250 words) related to the week's assigned readings and topics (see Assignments on Canvas). In addition to weekly sharing and discussion of reading and writing assignments, you will be scheduled for at least two writing workshops, for which you will post copies of your work the week before you are scheduled. All students add comments and questions to workshop pieces in advance of workshop. You will revise your workshop pieces for your final project. Post your creative assignments on Canvas in .pdf format, include your name, the date, and page numbers on your work, and use filenames that begin with your last name, e.g.: Zolf\_week4piece.pdf.
- **FINAL PROJECT/PORTFOLIO (35%):** Your final project/portfolio will be related to witnessing and include critical and creative components. It will consist of at least 10 revised and polished pages of your best work from the class, plus an at least 750-word critical process statement. You are expected to do external research in your process of composing your final project. Your grade will be based on the extent and quality of the revisions you have made and the overall progress of your writing and thinking. Your final pieces should be revised, polished versions of any of the following: the writing you have brought to workshop; additional writing related to your project done this term; any of your exercise assignments or in-class writing exercises. Please label your portfolio using your last name: for example, Mullen\_final.pdf and submit the file in pdf. Final portfolios are due on Canvas by 3:30pm on the last day of class, December 4. You will read from your final project in the final class reading at Kelly Writers House at 5pm on December 4. Further guidelines provided in class. If you include artwork as part of your final project, you still need to include at least 10 pages of writing.

**COURSE SCHEDULE:** Each week will feature a specific theme and writer(s) whose work relates to witnessing. You will read their work and write creative/critical responses each week.

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### Week 1 / August 28: **Writing and Witnessing introduction**

- reading: Claudia Rankine, excerpt from *Citizen* [C]  
 Bhanu Kapil, "Twelve Questions" from *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers* [C]  
 M. NourbeSe Philip, "Discourse on the Logic of Language" from *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* [C]  
 Audre Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" from *Sister Outsider* [C]  
 Audre Lorde Questionnaire (compiled by Divya Victor) [C]

### Week 2 / September 4: **Testimony, bearing witness, response-ability**

- reading: Divya Victor, excerpt from *Kith* [C]  
 Samantha Giles, excerpt from *Total Recall* [C]  
 Kelly Oliver, "Witnessing and Testimony" [C]
- due: Response to the week's readings. Post on Canvas and bring to class.  
 Question exercise. Bring to class.

Week 3 / September 11: **Witnessing and complicity**

- reading: Juliana Spahr, *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* [C]  
 Susan Briante, excerpt from *Defacing the Monument* [C]  
 due: Response to the week's readings. Post on Canvas and bring to class.  
 Question exercise. Bring to class.

Week 4 / September 18: **Surveillance and sousveillance; Emily Abendroth visit**

- reading: Emily Abendroth, excerpt from *Sousveillance Pageant* [C]  
 due: Response to the week's readings. Post on Canvas and bring to class.  
 Prepare questions for Abendroth's visit  
 Question exercise – 500-word essay. Bring to class.

Week 5 / September 25: **No One bears witness for the witness**

- reading: Charles Reznikoff, excerpt from *Holocaust* [C]  
 Paul Celan, "Death Fugue," "Ashglory" (translated by Pierre Joris) [C]  
 Mosab Abu Toha, from *Things You May Find Hidden In My Ear: Poems from Gaza* [C]  
 Dori Laub, excerpt from *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub) [C]  
 due: Response to the week's readings. Post on Canvas and bring to class.  
 Final Question exercise response. Bring to class.

Week 6 / October 2: **Borderlands; Anthony Cody class visit**

- reading: Anthony Cody, *Borderland Apocrypha*  
 due: Response to the week's reading. Post on Canvas and bring to class.  
 Have questions prepared for Cody visit  
 Workshop – bring marked-up responses to peer work

Week 7 / October 9: **Loss has made a tenuous we**

- reading: Solmaz Sharif, excerpt from *Look* [C]  
 Judith Butler, excerpt from *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* [C]  
 Don Mee Choi, excerpt from *DMZ Colony* [C]  
 Akilah Oliver, excerpt from *the she said dialogues: flesh memory* [C]  
 due: Response to the week's readings. Post on Canvas and bring to class.  
 Workshop – bring marked-up responses to peer work

Week 8 / October 16: **Witnessing kith and kin; Divya Victor visit**

- reading: Divya Victor, *Curb*  
 Divya Victor, ">>[\[WOMAN WAILING\]](#): On the Problem of Representing Trauma as a Brown Woman Within the Institution of Poetry" [C]  
[Divya Victor interview with Mark-Kim Arnold](#), "I had to grow a new tongue" [C]  
 recommended: Divya Victor, "[Sugar on the Gash](#)"  
 Cathy Park Hong, "United" in *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* [C]  
 due: Response to the week's readings. Post on Canvas and bring to class.  
 Final project outline  
 Have questions prepared for Victor visit  
 Workshop – bring marked-up responses to peer work

Week 9 / October 23: **Whereas in the grasses grasses grasses**

- reading: Layli Long Soldier, *Whereas*, excerpt [C]  
 Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Introduction to *An Indigenous People's History of the United States* [C]  
 The Congressional Resolution of Apology to Native Americans (S.J. Res. 14–111th Congress, 2009-2010. Found on Congress.gov) [C]
- due: Congress.gov exercise and Response to readings. Post on Canvas and bring to class.  
 Workshop – bring marked-up responses to peer work

Week 10 /October 30: **The uncertain line between witness and spectator**

- reading: Saidiya Hartman, excerpt from *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in 19th Century America* [C]  
 Michael Rothberg, intro to *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* [C]  
 Christina Sharpe, excerpt from *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* [C]
- due: Response to the week's readings. Post on Canvas and bring to class.  
 Workshop – bring marked-up responses to peer work

Week 11 / November 6: **Defend the dead**

- reading: M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*
- due: Critical response to *Zong!* and Re-appropriation exercise. Post and bring to class.  
 Have questions prepared for Philip visit  
 Workshop – bring marked-up responses to peer work

Week 12 /November 13:**Unassimilable content**

- reading: Bhanu Kapil, *Ban en Banlieue*  
 Bhanu Kapil, "Writing/Not-Writing: Th[a][e] Diasporic Self: Notes Towards a Race Riot Scene" [C]
- recommended: Reviews of *Ban en Banlieue*: <http://www.nightboat.org/title/ban-en-banlieue>
- due: Response to the week's reading. Post on Canvas and bring to class.  
 Workshop – bring marked-up responses to peer work

Week 13 /November 20: **Group workshop of final project drafts; meetings with Professor Zolf**

Week 14 / December 4: **Final words, Class reading at Kelly Writers House**

- due: Final Project/Portfolio posted on Canvas by 3:30 pm, December 4. Read from final projects at Kelly Writers House at 5pm.

## POLICIES

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• **Attendance:** In a three-hour course, it is crucial that all students come to class on time and well prepared to talk, listen, and share their thinking. Lateness and absence will significantly affect your grade. If you miss more than 10 minutes of a class, I will count you as absent for the day. More than one absence will lower your grade by a third: for example, a final grade of A- will become a B+. All absences must be reported using a Course Absence Report from Penn InTouch. If you plan to miss class during the semester for a religious holiday, please notify me within the first 2 weeks of class.

• **Deadlines:** Efficient, timely execution of workflow is crucial to your growth as a writer. Late work will affect your grade. Contact me if you are concerned about meeting your deadlines; I am available to help strategize.

Please note that this course will honor the “shitty first draft” code: always turn in *something*, even if you know it could benefit from more time for polish.

- **Late assignment days:** Late assignment days are built-in grace periods for a limited number of Canvas assignments. You have three (3) late days to use during the semester: for up to three assignments, you are allowed to submit up to twenty-four (24) hours late. To use your late days, submit your assignment after the deadline. You do not need to ask permission to use your late day(s), nor provide any explanation.

- **Masking and wellness:** Please note that masks are welcome in this class, and are available at CPCW. If you have been exposed to COVID-19 or are experiencing symptoms of illness, please contact me before class time so that we can work together to make a plan, which might include Zooming into class.

- **A Note on Content Warnings**

There will periodically be material in our readings that may be upsetting to some, including depictions of violence, slavery, and genocide. As this is a course on contemporary writing and witnessing, it is inevitable that difficult material will sometimes surface (both in our course readings and in student writing), and it is necessary that we figure out ways to discuss it that preserve the integrity of the writer while also allowing readers to prepare themselves emotionally.

Toward that end, we will try to make it a practice to do two things: 1) Give a verbal or written content warning when new work is distributed. You can simply say something like this: “This piece contains allusions to domestic violence/rape/verbal abuse,” and 2) Frame any potentially hurtful or offensive language in your work beforehand in a way that communicates what you think you are trying to do. For example, “There are derogatory terms for women in this work. I am trying to depict the way these terms are experienced by children hearing them. Not sure it worked in the way I was hoping though. I’m interested in hearing how you think they are working in the piece.”

Finally, sometimes we may make a mistake and a content warning may be missed. Likewise, a conversation may take an unexpected turn. We should all do our best to be forgiving, to hold space for all the contradictions and differences each of us brings to the room, and to approach our time together with a spirit of generosity. If anyone feels overwhelmed or triggered by any material that surfaces, please feel okay about stepping out for a spell to gather yourself. You can also simply say something like this: “I’m feeling unwell/overwhelmed by/triggered by this conversation and I need to take a break.” Again, please also make an effort to come and talk with me if you are experiencing any difficulties.

- **Electronics, printing, in-class writing:** While we’ll be using online resources in this class, laptops, tablets, and phones should be used only as part of an in-class activity or as an accommodation. Whenever possible, readings should be brought to class printed out and ready to be marked up; please take time to familiarize yourself with where and during what hours you have access to a printer on campus (such as Van Pelt, Kelly Writers House, LGBT Center, Makuu, PAACH, La Casa Latina, Fisher-Bennett Hall, etc.). Most writing in class will be done by hand.

- **Academic and disability support:** If you have a disability for which you require accommodation, please notify me within the first two weeks of class. Please note that this course will honor self-diagnosis. The University of Pennsylvania provides reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities who have self-identified and received approval from Disability Services. Students can contact Disability Services and make appointments to discuss and/or request accommodations by calling 215-573-9235. In addition, the Weingarten Center offers a variety of resources to support all Penn students in reaching their academic goals. All services are free and confidential. Learning consultations and learning strategies workshops support all students in developing more efficient and effective study skills and learning strategies. Learning specialists work with students to address time and project management, academic reading and writing, note-taking, problem-solving, exam preparation, test-taking, self-regulation, and flexibility. Students can take advantage of free on-campus tutoring for many Penn courses in both drop-in and weekly contract format. To contact the Weingarten Center,

call 215-573-9235. The office is located in Hamilton Village at 220 S. 40th Street, Suite 260. For more information about both academic and disability support, visit <https://wlrc.vpul.upenn.edu/>. If you have any suggestions for how this course can be more accommodating, please let me know. Additionally, I encourage you to take advantage of the Weigle Information Commons <https://www.library.upenn.edu/wic>, [wic1@pobox.upenn.edu](mailto:wic1@pobox.upenn.edu)), which offers group study rooms; one-on-one and small-group assistance with research skills, time and project management, and writing and communication skills; equipment, software, training, and support for digital media projects; and onsite services including workshops and walk-in and appointment-based assistance.

- **Wellness:** Your mental health and wellness are of utmost importance to me. I am happy to chat or just to listen if you need someone to talk to, even if it's not specifically about this course. If you or someone you know is in distress and urgently needs to speak with someone, please do not hesitate to contact CAPS: 215-898-7021; 3624 Market St. If you are uncomfortable reaching out to CAPS, I am happy to contact them on your behalf.

- **Extra help:** I enthusiastically welcome you to contact me for an appointment if you would like additional feedback on your work, your writing goals, or your questions about writing, editing, and publishing in general. I am often available before or after class, and by appointment on Zoom on Mondays. My office is on the second floor of CPCW (3809 Walnut Street), room 208.

- **Plagiarism\*\*:** Plagiarism consists of copying or paraphrasing too closely the words, ideas, sequence of ideas, or insights of another person or source without giving that person or source appropriate credit. An act of plagiarism will be taken seriously; academic dishonesty offenses are reported to the office of student conduct. For an overview of academic integrity at Penn, please consult [http://gethelp.library.upenn.edu/PORT/documentation/plagiarism\\_policy.html](http://gethelp.library.upenn.edu/PORT/documentation/plagiarism_policy.html) and [http://www.upenn.edu/academicintegrity/ai\\_codeofacademicintegrity.html](http://www.upenn.edu/academicintegrity/ai_codeofacademicintegrity.html). If you have questions about citing your sources appropriately or about how to avoid plagiarism, please do not hesitate to talk with me.

**\*\*** While there is a wealth of examples of literary and art works that challenge the foundational tenets of authorship, originality, fidelity and authenticity, students will be expected to familiarize themselves with this Code. Works produced in the course will be considered your own work and thus each student must be prepared to discuss, defend, and/or address their methodologies including any intentional mimicry, reproduction and/or sampling of already existing material.