

## **School of Arts & Sciences Prospectus Fall 2024**

COML 0522: Testimony: Life-writing as Dialogue

Wednesdays 1:45-4:44pm

Professor: Sarah Ropp, Ph.D.

### **Course Description**

This hybrid literature/creative writing course centers on the genre of *testimony* as a form of life-writing and self-making that is fundamentally dialogic; that is, dependent on what Dori Laub calls “a listening other” to be fully realized. We will consider the concept and practice of testimony through three intersecting avenues. First, we will explore the multivalent critical theory of testimony, drawing from a range of disciplines including memory and trauma studies; human rights scholarship and activism; feminist philosophy; queer theory; disability studies; and more. Second, we will read and analyze contemporary testimony in a variety of genres, produced by people of diverse identities and experiences from around the world. Third, we will write and share in community our own series of short testimonies, learning and practicing critical skills for this particular form of dialogic practice that are transferable beyond the course, including: deep listening, self- and other-awareness, and the capacity to embrace the other’s enduring strangeness and incomprehensibility while still recognizing their humanity.

**Importantly, this is not a traditional writing workshop with peer review and revision cycles. While attention to craft is part of the testimonial process, the focus here is on sharing and receiving personal narratives without critique of craft. The course is open to all majors, and no particular “talent” or identity as a writer is required. This is an SNF Paideia designated course.**

### **Class Structure for Fall 2024**

**In-class Activities:** This one-credit seminar meets once a week for three hours (Wednesdays 1:45-4:44pm). We will spend our time together discussing assigned reading, sharing assigned writing, and doing new reading and writing exercises. Occasionally, guest writers may visit our class to share their writing and answer questions about the craft and practice of testimony. As a small seminar structured around sharing and receiving testimony, a sense of community and trust will be critical, as deep engagement and active participation are expected. We will collectively establish community agreements to create a safe(r) space for all present, and we will work on building trust over time, beginning with lower-stakes and less-vulnerable forms of sharing and including opt-out structures.

**Out-of-class Activities:** The assigned out-of-class work each week will alternate between assigned reading and assigned writing. The assigned reading will be the theory and literature of testimony. The assigned writing will be short (approximately 3-5 pages) testimonials in a variety of formats and on a range of life-writing topics. On “reading” weeks, you will be asked to prepare a short (<1 page), informal “pre-work” of some kind in preparation to discuss the assigned text in class (for example, annotating the text, or noting three questions you have about the text to bring to the class discussion). We may do short writing exercises in class on reading weeks, but no testimonial writing will be assigned outside of class. On “writing” weeks, there will be no out-of-class reading assigned, but we will read or watch short pieces of testimony in class as well as share and receive the testimonials we have written. At least once during the semester, we will go out for a meal together and attend a [Moth Live Storytelling](#) event as a class. The cost of this special evening out will be fully covered for all students. We will schedule it in consultation with everyone in the class so that as many people as possible can attend.

### Outline of Assignments & Assessments

- Pre-work on assigned reading (7 x 2 points each): 15% of final grade
- 3-5pp testimonials (7 x 5 points each): 35% of final grade
- Participation: 30% of final grade
- 7-10pp final paper (either literary analysis OR personal narrative): 20% of final grade

*Note that we will alternate between “reading weeks” (when pre-work of approx. one page or less based on the assigned reading is due) and “writing weeks” (when testimonials, or personal narratives, are due and no out-of-class reading is assigned). Note as well that the final paper may be an expansion of a testimonial you have already written and turned in, a brand new testimonial, OR a literary analysis of one or more works of testimony studied in the course, as you wish.*

*Grading for pre-work is based largely on completion. Grading for testimonials as well as the final paper is based largely on adherence to the assignment guidelines + evident effort/depth. Grading of participation is determined holistically and is based on attendance, in-class engagement, self-assessment, and meeting with the instructor at least once in office hours over the course of the semester.*

### Readings

Below are some of the texts that we may explore. Note that we will read selections from these texts (not full books), some as assigned reading, some together during class. Students will also have the opportunity to critically review the text list and suggest alternative or additional texts. ALL TEXTS WILL BE PROVIDED BY THE INSTRUCTOR. THERE IS NO COST ASSOCIATED WITH TAKING THIS COURSE. All texts will be in English, but you are welcome to read non-English texts in the original if it is a language you know.

- *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* by Shoshana Felman & Dori Laub (1992)
- *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* by Adriana Cavarero (1997)
- *Body Work: The Radical Power of Personal Narrative* by Melissa Febos (2022)
- *How the Word Is Passed* by Clint Smith (2021)
- *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire (1970)
- “Testimonio: The Witness, the Truth, and the Inaudible” by Ana Forcinito (2016)
- “The ‘I’ in Internet” by Jia Tolentino (2019)
- *In Praise of Love* by Alain Badiou (trans. Peter Bush) (2012)
- *Playful Memories: The Autofictional Turn in Post-Dictatorship Argentina*, edited by Jordana Blejmar (2016)
- *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life-Writing* by Thomas Couser (1997)
- *Decolonising the Mind* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1981)
- *Brilliant Imperfection* by Eli Clare (2017)
- *Know My Name* by Chanel Miller (2019)
- *Disability Visibility*, edited by Alice Wong (2020)
- *The Argonauts* by Maggie Nelson (2015)
- *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987)
- *My Broken Language* by Quiara Alegría Hudes (2021)

- *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference* by Greta Thunberg (2018)
- *What My Bones Know* by Stephanie Foo (2022)
- *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe (2022)
- *Everything Sad Is Untrue* by Daniel Nayeri (2019)
- *Brief aan mijn moeder (Letter to My Mother)* by Ischa Meijer (1974)
- *Diario de una princesa montonera (Diary of a Montonera Princess)* by Mariana Eva Perez (2012)
- *Hijab Butch Blues* by Lamya H. (2023)
- *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú (I, Rigoberta Menchú)* by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray and Rigoberta Menchú (1983)
- *Educated* by Tara Westover (2018)
- *The Magic Fish* by Trung Le Nguyen (2020)
- *Notes on Grief* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2021)
- *Born a Crime* by Trevor Noah (2016)
- *Things You May Find Hidden in My Ear: Poems from Gaza* by Mosab Abu Toha (2022)
- *A Life Less Ordinary* by Baby Haldar (trans. Urvashi Butalia) (2006)
- *Speaking Our Truth: A Journey of Reconciliation* by Monique Gray Smith (2017)
- *Trash White* by Moses Storm (2022)