

# Course Overview

English 311 (20-21st C Literature Seminar)

MODERN ELEGY

Tuesday & Thursday, 12-1:50pm in Humanities 109



## Course Description

“We need elegies,” concludes poet Countee Cullen at the end of his 1925 poem “Threnody for a Brown Girl.” In this course, we will ask: what can literature possibly offer us in the experience of grieving our beloved dead? How might stanzas or musical language negotiate the intersection of private and public trauma, relating individuals to the world in moments of the most intense feeling? What kind of poetry can speak to structural violence and mass killings in racist, sexist, and xenophobic states? What relationships can we imagine between mourning, literature, and politics? Derived from the Greek for “mournful song,” the traditional “European elegy” is understood to move through three stages of loss: from lament, to praise, to consolation. Together, we will consider the legacies of this form, its developments across the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and any potential it might have for our present. We will study elegies that confront intimate loss as well the most devastating aspects of the past century: lynchings, the Holocaust, perpetual war and industrialized armed conflict, the police

murders of Black people, the AIDS epidemic, and the COVID-19 pandemic. We will root our investigations in various theoretical approaches, close reading poems that, in Jahan Ramazani's words, "erupt with all the violence and irresolution, all the guilt and ambivalence of modern mourning." In this student-centered, writing-intensive seminar, interactive discussions and various creative and scaffolded writing assignments will provide multiple ways in to this challenging and moving material.

### Content Notification

As is likely evident from the description, these texts engage, sometimes through blunt description, various forms of violence, loss, and trauma that saturate and shape the 20th and 21st centuries. Among the topics we will encounter are war, slavery, settler colonialism, totalitarianism, violent crime, graphic illness, loss of intimates, and social death.

### Some Notes on Approach & Goals

A comprehensive account of ALL ELEGIES written in and of the 20th and 21st centuries is simply outside of the scope of this class. Especially because, as David Kennedy writes, the overwhelming presence of elegiac modes in modern and contemporary writing makes it so that "poetry often seems like a sub-genre of elegy as opposed to the other way around." And though we WILL think historically this quarter, a full account of all the occasions and reasons for communal, public, or mass elegies during this period will also not be possible.

Instead, I have attempted to shape this course to provide a sense of the concerns and modes of elegiac poetry that is both broad and richly detailed. Our course goals are multiple:

1. To develop a capacious sense of Elegy as a mode and as a genre with a particular literary history;
2. To think concretely about the forms and formal strategies poets use to animate ideas and feelings (in other words, we'll do a ton of close reading);
3. To investigate the ways in which literature is in complex dialog with historical events, politics, and social forces.

## Instructor

Dr. Stefania Heim, [stefania.heim@wwu.edu](mailto:stefania.heim@wwu.edu) (<mailto:stefania.heim@wwu.edu>), HU 371  
(<mailto:stefania.heim@wwu.edu>)

I will hold in-person office hours from 2-3 on Tuesdays and Zoom office hours by appointment from 2-3pm on Thursdays.

Do not hesitate to email me with any questions or concerns. I strive to respond to messages within 24 hours during the week and 48 hours on weekends.

## Required Texts

Most of our course readings will be made available via PDFs or links on our Canvas site. Please make sure you have a comfortable way of reading and taking notes on these texts.

One volume is required for purchase, which we will read during week 5:



- Anne Carson, *Nox* (ISBN: 978-0811218702)

You will also be assigned ONE of the following three volumes, which are all available online:



- Mary Jo Bang, *Elegy* (ISBN: 978-1555975401)
- Prageeta Sharma, *Grief Sequence* (ISBN: 978-1940696881)
- Diana Khoi Nguyen, *Ghost Of* (ISBN: 978-1632430526)

## Required Work

### Preparation / Participation

Attendance is mandatory for this class and will be tallied using the Canvas Attendance feature (if you notice that I have made an accounting error please don't hesitate to let me know!) In seminar courses preparation means more than showing up and doing the reading (though this is always an essential first step)! I expect each of you to be an active and engaged contributor to our course and the collaborative learning we are engaged in. I will give you "active participation" grades four times over the course of the quarter.

### Collaborative Annotations / Discussion Posts

As part of your preparation and an extension of our class discussion you will complete either a collaborative annotation or a discussion post most weekw. These will be due on Thursday by 11am. Frequently, we will use Hypothes.is (software integrated into Canvas) to collaboratively (but asynchronously) annotate a poem. These annotations should be substantive (I imagine students will add **at least** four or five annotations to each piece) but may be open ended: You can use the space of the annotation to define words, ask questions, make connections, interpret ideas, notice figurative language, and respond to your classmates. I will also participate in these annotations. On a few occasions over the quarter I will assign Discussion Posts in the place of the Annotations.

### **Close Reading Paper**

During the first half of the quarter, you will write a 2-3 page close reading of an assigned poem, deepening and extending the analysis we do in discussion and through Hypothes.is.

### **Final Analytical Paper**

As a final for the course, you will write a 5-6 page analytical paper, either putting multiple course texts into conversation or applying a theoretical reading to an elegy.

### **Collaborative Book Presentation & Review Essay**

Based on preferences, you will be assigned to one of the optional books on the syllabus (*Elegy* by Mary Jo Bang, *Grief Sequence* by Prageeta Sharma, and *Ghost of* by Diana Khoi Nguyen). As a group you will select several poems from the book to assign to your classmates and lead a presentation and discussion on the book as a whole. These presentations will take place during Week 6 (Bang), Week 7 (Sharma), and Week 8 (Nguyen).

In addition, you will write an independent Review Essay on your collection (the sort of piece you might find in publications like *The New Yorker* or *The Boston Review*), placing it in a larger conversation about the form of elegy. These are due on the class following your group's presentation.



# Course Policies

## Assessment

When assessing your coursework I will be mindful of the fact that we all continue to face significant challenges and upheavals in our communal and private lives. If there is anything you would like me to know about your particular learning situation, please feel free to reach out at any point during the quarter. As always, I take into consideration the fact that there are different ways to engage with course material and to develop the skills of critical thinking, incisive reading, and clear, persuasive, and creative writing.

I will use the following breakdown to balance my assessment of your work in this class. The points add up to 100:

Attendance: 20 @ 1pt: 20pts / 20%

Active Participation: 4 @ 2pts / 8%

Weekly Annotations / Discussion Posts: 6 @ 2pts / 12%

Close Reading Paper: 10pts / 10%

Collaborative Book Presentation: 10pts / 10%

Review Essay: 15pts / 15%

Final Analytical Paper: 25pts / 25%

## Late Work Policy

Keeping up with course assignments and deadlines is important for a variety of reasons. Writing projects build progressively and our course develops alongside them. They also form the basis of our communal work and thus, late assignments compromise everyone's full engagement.

Because of this, late **ANNOTATIONS OR DISCUSSION POSTS** (after 11am on Thursday) can be posted for **partial credit** until our class meeting at noon. **Posts uploaded after class will not receive credit.**

If you know that you will need an extension for a formal writing project (the Close Reading Paper, Review Essay, or Analytical Paper), please let me know as soon as possible. On these projects, **extensions requested at least 24 hours in advance** will be considered.

# Academic Integrity

Western's Academic Honesty Policy holds that violations of the policy occur when students: claim as their own the achievements, work, or arguments of others; use unauthorized resources to complete a course assignment or requirement; or help someone else to engage in academically dishonest behavior. I enter the shared virtual space of our course with the assumption that you are aware of these policies and will work with integrity, only handing in work and ideas that are your own.

Western's academic integrity website ([www.edu/integrity](http://www.edu/integrity)) details various types of academic dishonesty and how to avoid them. I am obligated to report all instances of academic dishonesty.

Please see the library's page on [Plagiarism Policies & Guidelines \(https://libguides.wvu.edu/plagiarism\)](https://libguides.wvu.edu/plagiarism) for more information about what plagiarism is and how to avoid it.

# Equal Respect

I am committed to establishing and maintaining a classroom climate that is inclusive and respectful. This does not mean that everyone must always agree. Just as we learn to consider the subject positions and relationship to power of the writers and figures we study, we must interrogate our own relationship to the material, our social location, and our political commitments. Please make your best effort to correctly pronounce one another's names and to respect each other's personal pronouns. I do not condone and will not tolerate discrimination or harassment for any reason, including on the basis of race, color, creed, religion, national origin, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, disability, veteran status, age, etc.

# Accommodations

## Disability Resources for Students

Western's commitment to creating an equitable and non-discriminatory learning environment includes accommodating students with disabilities. Students who need support or who have questions about learning accommodations in remote contexts should contact the DisAbility Access Center (DAC) at [disability.wvu.edu](http://disability.wvu.edu).

## Religious Accommodation

Western provides reasonable accommodation for students to take holidays for reasons of faith or conscience or for organized activities conducted under the auspices of a religious denomination, church, or religious organization. Students seeking such accommodation must provide written notice to their faculty within the first two weeks of the course, citing the specific dates for which they will be absent. "Reasonable accommodation" means that faculty will coordinate with the student on

scheduling examinations or other activities necessary for completion of the course or program and includes rescheduling examinations or activities or offering different times for examinations or activities. Additional information about this accommodation can be found in [SB 5166: Providing religious accommodations for postsecondary students \(https://app.leg.wa.gov/billssummary?BillNumber=5166&Initiative=false&Year=2019\)](https://app.leg.wa.gov/billssummary?BillNumber=5166&Initiative=false&Year=2019).

## Covid-19 Safety Information

Due to the ongoing risk of community spread of COVID-19, WWU students are reminded that proper use of masks is required in all indoor spaces on campus and WWU transportation. Your cooperation will play an important role in preventing COVID-19 transmission and keeping our classroom spaces open for face-to-face instruction. You should stay home if you have any possible COVID-19 symptoms. If you have symptoms and need to stay home, or if you are instructed to isolate due to a positive COVID-19 diagnosis or close contact with a diagnosed person, contact me to make alternate arrangements for completing assigned class work.

If you disregard this mandate (including wearing a mask improperly) you are potentially putting your classmates at risk, which is against the expectations of the WWU Student Code of Conduct. If a faculty member identifies an unsafe situation in the class, they have the authority to tell any student contributing to the problem to change their unsafe behavior or, failing that, to direct the student to leave the place where the class is taking place.

# Schedule of Readings & Assignments

Additional detail about each week's work (including links to Readings as well as Annotations, Discussions, and Assignment submissions) can be found on the course landing Modules page, which will be populated weekly. NOTE: Often poems accessed via link will have audio of the poets reading available. Please always listen to these!

Both because we will be reading largely from PDF's and links and because I'm hoping to shape aspects of the reading list as we go, this schedule is subject to change. Please check back frequently!

## Week 1

**Tues, Jan 4**

INTRODUCTION TO ELEGY

W.S. Merwin, "Elegy" (1973)

Audre Lorde, "There Are No Honest Poems About Dead Women" (1986)

**Thurs, Jan 6**

**No Class Meeting**

David Kennedy, *Elegy*, Ch. 1 ("Form Without Frontiers") and Ch. 2 ("What Was Elegy?")

Katie Peterson, "Elegy" (2013)

## Week 2

**Tues, Jan 11**

WAR ELEGY: THE BATTLEFIELD

Wilfred Owen, "Preface to Poems" (1920)

"Anthem for Doomed Youth" (1920)

Siegfried Sassoon, "To Any Dead Officer" (1917)

Charles Hamilton Sorley, "When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead" (1915)

## **Thurs, Jan 13**

WAR ELEGY: BEYOND THE BATTLEFIELD

Judith Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics" [essay]

Deborah Paredez, "Wife's Disaster Manual" and "Edgewood Elegy" (2020)

Solmaz Sharif, "Personal Effects" (2016)

Craig Sandos Perez, from "ta(la)ya" (2014)

## **Week 3**

### **Tues, Jan 18**

FOCUS: RILKE & RUKEYSER

Rainer Maria Rilke, from *Duino Elegies*: First, Fourth, Eighth, and Tenth Elegy (1923)

Muriel Rukeyser, "First Elegy: Rotten Lake" (1939), Eighth Elegy: Children's Elegy" (1949)

### **Thurs, Jan 20**

FOCUS: AKHMATOVA & CELAN

Paul Celan, "Death Fugue" (1948)

Anna Akhmatova, "Requiem" (1963)

**Close Reading Draft Due**

## **Week 4**

### **Tues, Jan 25**

AMERICA, ATROCITY

Lucille Clifton, "at the cemetery, walnut grove plantation, south carolina, 1989" (1991)

June Jordan, "Poem for Nana" (1980)

Layli Long Soldier, "38" (2017)

Daniel Borzutzky, "Written After a Massacre in the Year 2018" (2018)

### **Thurs, Jan 27**

INTIMATE ELEGY: KADDISH

Allen Ginsberg, "Kaddish" (1959)

### Close Reading Revision

## Week 5

**Tues, Feb 1**

GRIEF IN TRANSLATION

Anne Carson, *Nox* (2010)

**Thurs, Feb 3**

GRIEF IN TRANSLATION

Anne Carson, *Nox*, cont.

## Week 6

**Tues, Feb 8**

INTIMATE ELEGY: MYTH, RITUAL, BELIEF

Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" [essay]

Marie Howe, "What the Living Do" (1998)

Natasha Trethewey, "Myth" (2007)

Tracy K. Smith, "The Speed of Belief" (2011)

Ross Gay, "The Opening" (2015)

**Thurs, Feb 10**

**BOOK 1: Book Presentation & Excerpts from Mary Jo Bang, *Elegy***

## Week 7

**Tues, Feb 15**



## HOSPITAL ELEGY

Adrienne Rich, "A Woman Dead in her Forties" (1978)

Paul Monette, from *Love Alone: 18 Elegies for Rog* (1988)

Thom Gunn, "Lament" (1994)

**Thurs, Feb 17**

**BOOK 2: Book Presentation & Excerpts from Prageeta Sharma, *Grief Sequence***

## Week 8

**Tues, Feb 22**

### ACRID ELEGY

William Carlos Williams, "Death" (1930)

"The Last Words of My English Grandmother" (1939)

Marilyn Chin, from "Beautiful Boyfriend" (2013)

Joyelle McSweeney, "Simon the Good" (2020)

"And I Might Find her if I'm Looking Like I Can" (2020)

**Thurs, Feb 24**

**BOOK 3: Book Presentation & Excerpts from Diana Khoi Nguyen, *Ghost Of***

## Week 9

**Tues, Mar 1**

### ELEGY & #BLACK LIVES MATTER

Christina Sharpe, "The Wake" [essay]

Claude McKay, "The Lynching" (1922)

Langston Hughes, "Birmingham Sunday" (1963)

**FINAL ANALYTICAL PAPER PITCHES**

## **Thurs, Mar 3**

ELEGY & #BLACK LIVES MATTER

Claudia Rankine, "The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning" [Essay]

Audre Lorde, "A Woman / Dirge for Wasted Children" (1978)

"The Same Death Over and Over or Lullabies Are for Children" (1978)

Cortney Lamar Charleston, "Meditation on Black Death Ending With an X-Ray" (2017)

"Charleston" (2017)

Danez Smith, "every day is a funeral & a miracle" (2017)

"not an elegy" (2017)

## **Week 10**

### **Tues, Mar 8**

INTIMATE ELEGY: PHILOSOPHY, LANGUAGE, FORM

Kristin Prevallet, "Forms of Elegy" (2007)

Simone White, "Dog Poem" (2018)

Kristen Case, "Elegy" (2019)

### **Thurs Mar 10**

Some Tentative Conclusions

**Monday, March 14: FINAL PAPERS DUE**