It’s All a Plot: Uncovering the Conspiracy Narrative

The Masons, the grassy knoll, birtherism. While we seem to live in an especially paranoid moment, conspiracy narratives have been around as long as people have been able to whisper and needed to explain social inequities, major calamities or the workings of power and oppression. This course will explore the nature of conspiracy narratives, both those we find in fiction and those that circulate among us in the “real” world. We will examine conspiracy narratives across genres and media, including novels and film, as well as investigate their appearance on various news platforms. Do these narratives share common attributes and motivations? What roles do race, class, and gender play in their construction? What are the ramifications of their proliferation for democratic societies?

Objectives

This intensive reading and writing course aims to help you develop the reading and writing skills essential to college-level work. Classes will emphasize discussion, collaborative learning, and open-ended exploration of texts and ideas. You’ll work on the mechanics of writing analytical essays and research papers, including structuring arguments, evaluating (a must when dealing with conspiracies!) and using textual evidence, and working with secondary sources. Additionally, the final research project will introduce you to independent research techniques and skills. The strategies of close reading, textual analysis, and argumentation developed in the course will have relevance to your future studies here at NYU, but also prepare you in important ways for living in this sometimes crazy world.

Required Texts:
(This course is a heavy reading course, but the texts are mostly novels and so reading will generally go faster.)

None Dare Call It Conspiracy, Gary Allen (1971) (excerpted handout)
Benito Cereno, Herman Melville (1855)
Imperium in Imperio, Sutton Griggs (1899)
The Iron Heel, Jack London (1908)
The Crying of Lot 49, Thomas Pynchon (1966)
Mumbo Jumbo, Ishmael Reed (1977)
Infomocracy, Malka Older (2016)

Films:
The Manchurian Candidate (1962)
JFK (1991)
Sorry to Bother You (2018)
Grades Breakdown

Discussion Leader 10% (20 min)
Conspiracy Presentation 15% (10 min)
5 Reading Responses 20% (1 page each)
Short Essay 20% (5-6 pages)
Final Project
  Research Proposal 5% (1-2 pages)
  Work-in Progress Presentation 5% (4 min)
  Essay 25% (10 pages)

Assignments and Grade Percentages

1. Discussion Leader (20 min). 10%
Each of you will be responsible for leading the class discussion of one of the texts for that day, once during the semester. Prepare a series of questions that

- lead us to examine the novel or text’s important thematic concerns
- lead us to consider ways in which the text expands or challenges our understanding of conspiracy narratives, both real and fictional
- ask us to consider the current text in light of others we have read to that point

Your questions should not be yes/no questions. Why and how questions will force us to make sense of the material rather than simply register what’s been said. The class will be yours to direct for 20 minutes.

2. Conspiracy Theory Presentation (10 min with 1-page supporting summary/handout). 15%
Research an actual conspiracy theory and educate your classmates and me in a 10-minute multimodal presentation of your findings. Help us to understand the origins of the theory and its transmission as well as its narrative structure and tropes.

3. Reading responses. 20% (4% each)
Over the course of the semester, write 5 1-page responses to the reading. These responses will not only help you make sense of the material, but will also support your classmates slated to lead discussions during those lessons. I’ll create a schedule so we can be sure to spread these contributions across the course; however, everyone will be required to do at least one during the first four weeks.

4. Short Essay (5-6 pages). 20%
This essay, due on the Monday following lesson 5, will ask you to make sense of one of our early texts as an example of a conspiracy narrative, making reference to at least one of the theories of conspiracy narrative introduced in class.

5. Final Research Project. 35%
Your final research project consists of 3 parts:
  Research Proposal (1-2 pages, 5%)
  By the ninth lesson after consultation with me, you’ll draft a proposal outlining your project’s focus and anticipated materials.
Work-in-progress Presentation (4 min, 5%)
In a brief presentation to the class, you'll outline your project, highlighting your focus, tentative thesis, and problem areas.

Final Essay (10 pages, 25%)
You will write a researched essay that draws on both our fictional course texts and analysis of a “true” life conspiracy theory in order to convey an original idea about the circulation of conspiracy narratives in American culture.

Office Hours and Conferences
Although I will hold scheduled office hours, you should feel free to contact me by email to schedule a meeting at our mutual convenience. I will meet with you for a required scheduled conference once before each essay.

Classroom Policies

Attendance
Simply put, come to class and be on time. Our class is a reading and writing community. For this course to be successful, we’ll have to “conspire.” Being in class and on time is essential. I know, however, that emergencies arise. If you’re ill or have some other compelling reason for being absent, please let me know by email before the class and attach your homework. When you return, bring documentation (like a doctor’s note) explaining your absence. Be courteous and let me know if you must miss class and why. Religious observance and documented illness or family emergency are grounds for an absence to be excused.

Mounting unexcused absences will carry consequences. We meet only 14 times during the semester, so I’ll contact your advisor if you are absent without excuse two classes in a row. Too many absences will impact your grade.

Regardless of why you miss class, communicate with me as soon as possible about arranging a schedule for completing missed work.

Important: As you’ve probably learned by now, college can bring high pressure and a heavy workload. If you find yourself struggling to keep up for whatever reason, please talk to me. I want you to succeed; I can’t help you do that if you don’t communicate with me, so please keep the lines of communication open.

Plagiarism
The MLA Style Manual defines plagiarism as “[u]sing another person’s ideas or expressions in your writing without acknowledging the source. . . . [T]o plagiarize is to give the impression that you wrote or thought something that you in fact borrowed from someone.” Openly and thoughtfully bringing in the work of others is actually evidence of good scholarship, and not only do we encourage you to do so, we require it. However, if you use someone else’s words or ideas without giving that person or source credit, you are plagiarizing. Additionally, you may not submit work written for this course in another course (or vice versa) unless you receive permission from both me and the other professor. The penalties for plagiarizing may be severe, ranging from a zero on the assignment, receiving a failing grade or being dropped from the class, and disciplinary action by NYU. And regardless, you’ll lose the trust of those working with you—a penalty more severe than
you may imagine. Keep your reputation safe and your standing secure: do your own work; credit others when you borrow from them.

**Writing Center**
The Writing Center is a vital resource for student writers, which will give you the opportunity to gain another perspective on your essays in progress, and to work closely with a tutor on an essay you are developing. I strongly recommend visiting the Writing Center during the essay-writing process. For information on making an appointment with a consultant, visit [http://nyu.mywconline.com/](http://nyu.mywconline.com/)

**Other Helpful Resources** (Google the following titles if working with hard copy document. All but the MLA link are NYU resources, so search, for example, for “NYU Writing Affiliates”)

- [Writing Affiliates](#)
- [Residential International Student Engagement](#) (R.I.S.E.)
- [Academic Resource Center](#)
- [NYU Libraries](http://library.nyu.edu)
- [Resources for Commuter and Off-Campus Students](#)
- [MLA Style Center](https://style.mla.org/)

**Of Special Note**

**The Moses Center for students with disabilities:**
Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. The Moses Center website is [www.nyu.edu/csd](http://www.nyu.edu/csd). Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu) for further information.

Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.

**The NYU Wellness Exchange:** “[Y]our key to accessing the University’s extensive health and mental health resources.” By contacting the Wellness Exchange, you can find help with issues including illness, academic stress, depression, anxiety, and many more. 212-443-9999 is a 24-hour hotline. Email: wellness.exchange@nyu.edu.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Readings/Viewings</th>
<th>Work Due</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Jan 30</td>
<td>Intro</td>
<td><em>None Dare Call It Conspiracy</em> (excerpt, 35pp) X-Files, Jose Chung (in class)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Feb 6</td>
<td>Narrative, Race, and Conspiracy</td>
<td><em>The Confessions of Nat Turner</em> (18pp) <em>Benito Cereno</em> (86pp)</td>
<td>1 CTP</td>
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<td>3 Feb 13</td>
<td>The Hidden Empire</td>
<td><em>Imperium in Imperio</em> (100pp)*</td>
<td>2 DLs, 2 CTPs</td>
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<td>4 Feb 20</td>
<td>Workers of the World Unite!</td>
<td><em>Imperium in Imperio</em> (50 pp)* <em>The Iron Heel</em> (50 pp)*</td>
<td>2 DLs, 1 CTP</td>
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<td>5 Feb 27</td>
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<td><em>The Iron Heel</em> (50 pp)*</td>
<td>2 DLs, 3 CTPs</td>
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<td>Mar 2</td>
<td>Short Essay</td>
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<td>6 Mar 5</td>
<td>Communists Among Us</td>
<td>View: <em>The Manchurian Candidate</em>; Read: <em>The Crying of Lot 49</em> (1-80)</td>
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<td>7 Mar 12</td>
<td>The Grand Conspiracy I</td>
<td><em>The Crying of Lot 49</em> (81-160)</td>
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<td>8 Mar 26</td>
<td>The Grand Conspiracy II</td>
<td><em>Mumbo Jumbo</em> (1-116)</td>
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<td>9 Apr 2</td>
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<td><em>Mumbo Jumbo</em> (117-218)</td>
<td>2 DLs Research proposal</td>
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<td>10 Apr 9</td>
<td>Government Subversion</td>
<td>View: <em>JFK</em>; Read: <em>Infomocracy</em> (13-82)</td>
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<td>Big Data</td>
<td><em>Infomocracy</em> (83-207)</td>
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<td>12 Apr 23</td>
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<td><em>Infomocracy</em> (208-335)</td>
<td>2 DLs, 2 CTPs</td>
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<td>13 Apr 30</td>
<td>It All Comes Together</td>
<td><em>Infomocracy</em> (336-380)</td>
<td>2 DLs</td>
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<td>14 May 7</td>
<td>Your Work</td>
<td>View: <em>Sorry to Bother You</em></td>
<td>Work-in-Progress Presentations</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 11</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Final Essay</td>
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*Note: asterisked page breakouts are for e-texts with much shorter pages
DL = discussion leader
CTP = Conspiracy Theory Presentation