Lectures Monday & Wednesday 12:30-1:45pm, Silver Building, Room 206
New York University, Fall 2017

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What is normal—and how did it get that way? In this course we will explore the notion of the normal historically, understanding that what is abnormal, perverse or abjected in one time and place may become valued or at least accepted in another. How does the normal get established in relation to its “deviant” opposites, like the queer, the sick, the non-white, the unproductive or unprofitable? Sometimes norms describe (or dictate) what we should strive to be; since ancient times, however, there have also been traditions of thought and art that understood their most important task as confronting and destabilizing people’s sense of what is normal. This course will invite you to take part in these traditions by examining some of your own assumptions about what is normal, and subjecting them to critique. Throughout, we will move between ancient and modern sources, including dialogues by Plato and tragedies by Socrates and Euripides; works of theory by Adam Smith, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Michel Foucault, and Frantz Fanon; and modern literary works by Gertrude Stein, Nella Larsen, Virginia Woolf, and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, among others. One of our goals is to make everyone and everything usefully strange, or newly weird: especially everything—from normal sex to “Normcore”—that seems, well, normal.

Our other goal is to introduce the humanities as areas of active inquiry and imaginative interpretation. This course will bring you into contact with a range of texts, both ancient and modern, that have been influential in shaping the contemporary world. By reading them carefully together, we’ll be able to trace how the ideas in these texts have both endured and transformed, as different people in different times have gotten ahold of them. Writing assignments will be rigorous and text-based, a chance to treat these texts like the complicated machines they are, and try to figure out how they work. The assignments will also involve elements of choice and room for some free play. We believe a humanistic education makes us better humans because it helps us subject even the idea of what is “human” to scrutiny: it is another “norm” we will think about together. As a part of the College Core Curriculum, the course is designed to extend your
education beyond the focused studies of your major, helping you be a thoughtful, active member of society in whatever line of work you choose.

READINGS

Many of the readings for this course will be available on NYU Classes; they are designated “(NYUC)” in the schedule below. You will need to print out these readings and bring them to the lecture and section, as no laptops or other devices will be permitted, and we will be asking you to consult the text during class. We recognize that the cost of printing can add up, so we have done our best to keep book prices down to offset this cost. Please see Professor Freedgood if this is still a concern for you.

The following required texts are available at the NYU Bookstore:

Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*

Nella Larsen, *Passing*

Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, *Appropriate*

Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons*

**Note that we will also be making a class trip to see DJ Spooky perform *Rebirth of a Nation* at the NYU Skirball Center on Saturday, November 4. Attendance at this performance is a required component of the course. If you know that your schedule will not permit this, please speak to your recitation instructor as soon as possible so that we can arrange an alternate assignment. The alternate assignment may involve additional cost, such as purchasing a ticket to another performance.**

COURSE SCHEDULE

The following schedule is subject to change. Changes will be announced in lecture.

*Introduction: What is the Normal?*

Wed 9/6       Introduction


                              Fiona Duncan, “Normcore: Fashion for Those Who Realize They’re One in 7 Billion” (2014) (NYUC)

*Defamiliarization: Making Trouble for the Normal with Philosophy and Art*
Wed 9/13  Plato, *Apology* (ca. 400 BCE) and parable of the cave from *Republic* (380 BCE) (NYUC)

Fri 9/15  1st paper due: 2-page position paper. Use K-Hole’s “Youth Mode” report and Duncan’s *New York Magazine* piece to establish a definition of “Normcore,” then make an argument: should this trend be celebrated or is it lamentable? What other current/recent social phenomena can it be linked with? Make sure to avoid generalizations and support your claims convincingly, and do your best to make an original (i.e. surprising) argument. Post your paper to NYU Classes by 11:00pm.

Mon 9/18  Viktor Shklovsky, from “Art As Technique” (1917) (NYUC)

Bertolt Brecht, “Short Description of a New Technique of Acting” (1940) and excerpts from “Short Organon for the Theater” (1949) and *Mother Courage* (1939) (NYUC)

Wed 9/20  Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons* (1914)

Stein, excerpt from *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) (NYUC)

Mon 9/25  Roland Barthes, from *Mythologies* (1957)

*Healthiness*


Excerpts from *Hippocratic Corpus* (400s BCE) (NYUC)

Mon 10/2: Georges Canguillhem, from *The Normal and the Pathological* (1943) (NYUC)


Audre Lorde, from *The Cancer Journals* (1980) (NYUC)

Fri 10/6:  2nd paper due: defamiliarization assignment. Choose a familiar element of your everyday life and create a theory that defamiliarizes it, and reveals its surprising connections with broader systems of meaning and/or power. 4-5 pages. Post your paper to NYU Classes by 11:00pm.

Mon 10/9: FALL BREAK

*Whiteness*

Excerpt from “On Airs, Waters, Places,” *Hippocratic Corpus* (400s BCE) (NYUC)

Mon 10/16: Frantz Fanon, from *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) (NYUC)

Cheryl Harris, from “Whiteness as Property” (1993) (NYUC)


Mon 10/23: Discussion of *Passing*, cont’d; midterm review

Wed 10/25: MIDTERM EXAM

Mon 10/30: Richard Dyer, from *White* (1997) (NYUC)

Wed 11/1: Watch *Birth of a Nation* by D. W. Griffiths (1915) (link on NYUC)

Secondary material TBA (NYUC)

** Saturday 11/4 at 8pm: class trip to NYU Skirball Center to watch DJ Spooky, *Rebirth of a Nation*. (Informal write-ups to be posted on NYU Classes Forum 24 hours before your recitation section meets.)


Wed 11/8: 3rd paper due before class: What is whiteness? Compare the implicit theories of whiteness found in two of these four texts: *Birth of a Nation, Rebirth of a Nation, Passing, Appropriate*. 5-7 pages. Post your paper to NYU Classes by 11:00am.

*Normal sex*

Mon 11/13: Plato, *Symposium* (ca. 380 BCE); excerpt from *Phaedrus* (ca. 370 BCE) (NYUC)

Wed 11/15: Sophocles, *Oedipus the King* (429 BCE) (NYUC)

Mon 11/20: Sigmund Freud, “Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy” (1909) and excerpt from *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) (NYUC)

Wed 11/22 THANKSGIVING BREAK


Mon 12/4: 4th paper due before class: identify a display of sexuality (in literature, film, tv, photography, etc). Describe it in detail, then conduct a Platonic analysis, a Freudian analysis, and a Foucaultian analysis of your text. 5-7 pages. Post your paper to NYU Classes by 11:00am.

Profitability

Wed 12/6: Adam Smith, from The Wealth of Nations (1776) (NYUC)

Mon 12/11: Herman Melville, Bartleby the Scrivener (1853) (NYUC)

Tues 12/12 (Monday schedule): Karl Marx, from Capital, Vol I (Part I, Ch 1, Sections 1 and 35-46) (NYUC)

Wed 12/13: Karl Marx, from Capital, Section III, part D, pp 71-83 (NYUC)

Week of 12/18: FINAL EXAM (date/time TBA)

Course policies

Safety and respect: As you can see, in this course we will be discussing subjects—such as race, sex, class, and disability—that are sensitive and urgent for many of us. We believe it is crucial to examine texts that have engaged and shaped these subjects in important ways, even (or especially) when they contain beliefs which are painful to encounter. In order for us to be able to conduct this investigation together, we need to commit to treating each other with respect in all course-related activities (lectures, sections, office hours). We need to listen to each other carefully, just as we need to read our texts carefully, and avoid jumping to conclusions. Passionate disagreements are great; trying to bulldoze the opposition is not. In fact, practicing being passionate and reasonable at the same time is one of the best reasons to study the humanities.

Writing assignments: In this class you will complete four formal writing assignments, in addition to an in-class midterm exam and a final exam. Taken together, your four assignments should total at least 18 pages of writing. They will receive letter grades. Your recitation section instructors (TAs) may assign additional short written exercises designed to help you work towards the formal assignments. These will be graded check/check-plus/check-minus/no credit, and will count towards the participation component of your grade.

Attendance: Attendance at all meetings of the lecture and recitation is expected and required. Absences will adversely affect the participation component of students’ overall course grade. More than three absences from lecture and/or recitation section will most often lead to an automatic failing grade in the course, even if you have completed all other course requirements.
Participation: Participation in class discussion is a crucial part of this course. Each student is expected to contribute actively and thoughtfully every week in recitation section; we will also encourage participation during lectures. “Contributing actively and thoughtfully” means speaking in a way that reflects your careful engagement with the week’s reading and the questions under discussion, and it also means listening and responding to your classmates with curiosity and respect. You will need to bring the week’s readings with you—on paper—to all class meetings; we expect you will have heavily marked and annotated these readings, so that you can easily refer back to thoughts and questions you had while you were reading. Laptops won’t be allowed in lecture or section, and cell phones and other devices should remain “stowed” throughout class.

Communication with instructors:

Names and pronouns: It’s important to us (your professors and TAs) to be able to call on you and refer to you the right way. To that end, please let us know if we’re making a mistake in pronouncing your name; and please feel free to let us know your preferred pronoun.

One-on-one discussions: The professors and TAs are available weekly during regularly scheduled office hours (see the first page of this syllabus). If you would like to schedule a meeting at another time, please contact us via email and we’ll do our best to accommodate you. We prefer to discuss questions about course materials, assignments, etc. in person whenever possible; you are also welcome to email us, but please expect to allow approximately 48 hours for a response.

Grading breakdown:

- Paper 1: 5%
- Paper 2: 10%
- Papers 3 and 4: 20% each (40% total)
- Midterm exam: 10%
- Final exam: 15%
- Participation: 20%

For policies on academic integrity, accommodations for students with disabilities, and grading policies, please see the Core Curriculum guidelines attached at the end of this syllabus.

More on writing assignments:

• Please submit all assignments in a Microsoft Word document if possible; if you don’t have access to Word, you can submit a PDF. Please name the document with your last name, e.g. “JonesPaper1.docx” (if your last name is Jones)
• Assignments for this course should be written in twelve-point, standard font, with 1-inch margins, double-spaced.

• The stipulated length of an assignment (e.g. “4-5 pages”) indicates the number of full pages we expect it will take to satisfy the terms of the assignment. A first page with a large header section, or a page with big block quotes, is not quite a full page, and you should be aware of this so that you can make sure to take the full amount of time and space the assignment requires. Your total writing for all four papers should equal at least 18 pages.

• Please number all pages, and

• include your name and date and the paper title on the first page; don’t use a separate title page.

• Always include a “Works Cited” page with full bibliographic information for each text and/or performance you cite (even if you’re only citing one text). Throughout the paper, make sure to give a page number for each citation of the text. If you have questions about formatting either your in-text citations or your Works Cited page, we recommend the Purdue University Online Writing Lab: https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/

• Papers turned in after the deadline will be marked down for each day they are late. Very late assignments will not receive credit.

• If you’re having trouble with an assignment, or you anticipate a problem with a specific deadline, we encourage you to talk to your TA about it as soon as possible. It’s more likely that we can help if you don’t wait until the last minute.