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Expository Writing 20
Place-Making: Self-discovery in a Modern World

“Still we look for the world and for ourselves, yearning, calling out. We go on. We go on looking for the world and for ourselves in it.”

– Jim Corder

COURSE OVERVIEW

Daily Work: Reading, Viewing, Writing, Thinking

In this course we will consider significant questions surrounding self-discovery in modern American life, film, and literature. How do we each arrive at a sense of who we are, both as individuals and as members of a group? How does the institution, city, or natural environment we are in affect that sense of self? In what ways do our home identities— including race, gender, sexual orientation, and class— necessarily change as we encounter new places in our lives? The writers and directors we will study provide tentative answers and new complications to these central questions.

Texts:

Unit 1, Memoir: Susana Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted*

Unit 2, Essays: Richard Rodriguez’s “Late Victorians,” and Jamaica Kincaid’s “In History”

Unit 3, Films: *Into the Wild*, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore*

Many of our writing goals will change unit by unit, as you practice several distinct and important versions of the academic essay. Other goals will remain our focus throughout the whole of the course: developing your sense of what you already do well; challenging you to figure out how you want to grow as a writer; expanding your repertoire of revision techniques; and improving your ability to express complex, original ideas in effective and elegant prose. One of the most exciting things to learn in a writing course is that the learning process never stops; one doesn't "arrive" at being a good writer, but rather continually becomes one (its own kind of self-discovery). With these goals in mind, we begin with three important premises:

- Good writing is a process: you will develop and write response papers and essays, which we will discuss in conference and for which you will receive feedback from your fellow writers. You will then revise those essays, sometimes in several stages, giving your analysis and thinking time to evolve and grow more complex.

- Your writing will improve most when you possess clear ideas as to what you want to accomplish in each assignment: what aspects of the writer's craft matter to you, and how you want to grow and improve. Therefore this class asks you to be thoughtful and *self-reflective* about your writing process: to question and evaluate your own work in each assignment (in your Cover Letters with each essay) and in the course as a whole (in your Writer's Letter due the first week, and updated later in the semester).
- Whatever academic and professional your path your concentration takes you on, being an excellent writer will help you excel in it. The work we do in this class will stay with you throughout your academic career, and absolutely everyone will improve with our consistent practices in *reading, thinking, questioning, drafting and revising*.

The course is structured in the following units:

Unit 1: We begin with a psychological portrait of the self in *Girl, Interrupted*, Susanna Kaysen's astonishing memoir of her adolescent years in a psychiatric hospital. In the process of narrating her experiences there, Kaysen questions our fundamental notions of and assumptions about selfhood and sanity, and comments on how institutions impact those notions. Your first essay will give you the opportunity to engage in one of the most essential skills in academic writing: the close reading and interpretation of a text.

Unit 2: Next we will launch into a unit on essays that center on issues of race and culture, sexual-orientation, and place. We'll read a personal essay by the writer Richard Rodriguez, that focuses on gay men and the AIDS crisis in San Francisco, titled "Late Victorians." Essay 2 asks you to conduct a comparative analysis, reading Rodriguez's work alongside Jamaica Kincaid's short and powerful essay centered on colonialism and identity, "In History." You'll also have the opportunity to choose a third, contextual text, to bring into your building argument in Essay 2.

Unit 3: Finally, in examining films that narrate the trope of the journey of self-discovery, you will write a multi-source research paper that either complicates a currently held notion about self-discovery or sheds new light on the topic of selfhood. Our three film texts will be *Into the Wild* (2007), *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004), and *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974); your task will be to gather criticism and articles about the film that you choose, in order to create a context that supports a provocative thesis that you devise. Your analysis will consider the film's comment on selfhood or a quest for self-discovery through new environments or rapid change, conveyed through the conventions of cinema— a medium that has a powerful influence on our cultural understandings of narrative as well as our understanding, and experience, of the self.