



**English 822: Topics in Theory --- M: 4-6:30 PM --- 7105 Helen C. White  
Instructor Ramzi Fawaz --- Office Hours Monday 1-3 PM, 7195F HCW**

# **Three Cosmopolitan Thinkers: Hannah Arendt, Edward Said, and Toni Morrison**

Truly political activities [such as] acting and speaking, cannot be performed at all without the presence of others, without the public, without a space constituted by the many. . . . [Judgement] needs the presence of others ‘in whose place’ I must think, who’s perspectives it must take into consideration, and without whom it ever has the opportunity to operate at all. As logic, to be sound, depends on the presence of the self, so judgement, to be valid, depends on the presence of others. . . . Judging is one, if not the most, important activity in which this sharing-the-world-with-others comes to pass.

—Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (1961)

It is especially appropriate for the contemporary humanist to cultivate the sense of multiple worlds and complex interacting traditions, that inevitable combination I’ve mentioned of belonging and attachment, reception and resistance. The task of the humanist is not just to occupy a position or place, nor simply to belong somewhere, but rather to be both insider and outsider to the circulating ideas and values that are at issue in our society or someone else’s society or the society of the other.

—Edward Said, “The Return to Philology” (2001)

Isn’t that the kind of thing we fear strangers will do? Disturb. Betray. Prove they are not like us. . . . Why would we want to know a stranger when it is easier to estrange another? Why would we want to close the distance when we can close the gate? . . . It took some time to understand my unreasonable claims on that fisherwoman. To understand that I was longing for and missing some aspect of myself, and that there are no strangers. There are only versions of ourselves, many of which we have not embraced, most of which we wish to protect ourselves from. For the stranger is not foreign, she is random, not alien but remembered; and it is the randomness of the encounter with our already known—although unacknowledged—selves that summons a ripple of alarm.

—Toni Morrison, “Strangers” (1976)

**Course Description.** In this advanced theory seminar we will journey through the writing of three luminous, twentieth century thinkers: the political philosopher Hannah Arendt, the literary historian Edward Said, and the Nobel Prize winning author Toni Morrison. Despite their vastly distinct personal and intellectual backgrounds and preferred genres of writing—including political theory, book history, literary fiction, the critical essay, memoir, documentary, and more—all three shared a distinctly cosmopolitan worldview. This is political perspective and temperamental disposition oriented toward mutually transformative encounters between people of vastly different identities, geographical locations, and fundamental values and beliefs. Whether arguing for a radical democratic politics grounded in the reality of human plurality (Arendt); the necessity of cultivating cultural interpretations of literature and art attuned to the specificity of artists’ unique conditions of existence (Said); or dramatizing the internal incoherence and multiplicity of categories like race, gender, and sexuality (Morrison), all three held to the belief that we live in a universe inhabited by wildly heterogeneous minds who share a common world but witness and experience it differently. Consequently, they pursued intellectual and creative projects aimed at cultivating the capacity to encounter other consciousnesses,

lifeworlds, and perspectives in a spirit of non-violent mutual exchange and continual growth. In the process of reading widely across each of these thinkers' prodigious oeuvres, we will ask ourselves how we might each learn to practice the cosmopolitan, open-hearted, multi-dimensional and groundless worldview Arendt, Said, and Morrison bequeathed to us as a potential remedy for the murderous xenophobia and nihilism that permeates our time. But always in our own way.

**What are we learning?** Though our course is organized around the writing of an iconic intellectual trio, we will ultimately be using these giants of critical thought to learn about, cultivate, and practice a *distinctly cosmopolitan style of thought*. This is a mode of imaginative engagement with the world committed to mutually transformative exchanges across worldviews and perspectives; a rejection of superficial partisanship, identitarianism, or orthodox thinking of all kinds; a fiercely self-critical awareness of one's own biases, attachments, and predilections; and an attunement toward everything that is strange, counterintuitive, spontaneous, unexpected and contingent about worldly experience. In an age of increasing political polarization, the retreat of academic discourse into ever-more-narrow areas of specialization and impenetrable bubbles of self-satisfied jargon, and the rote performance of tired political theater on the left, right, and center, we will seek to hew our own path by learning from these three iconoclasts what it means to form one's own judgements in the face of countless forces of intellectual, political, and social conformity.

**What are we writing?** This course has two assignments, which include: 1) weekly discussion posts responding to our assigned course reading; 2) a 20-25 page final seminar paper.

**Instructions on assignment 1:** At the beginning of the term, I will place students into groups of 3-4 members. Each week, members from one group will post a 500-word (minimum) response to the reading on the discussion board by 11 PM Saturday night. This is to give everyone a little bit of time to scan people's comments before our class session on Monday afternoon. All other students in the class should reply to one of the posts by Monday morning at 10 AM with a minimum of one solid paragraph (though there are no set limits on how much you can say). The main posts should zero-in on a particular question, concept, or idea in the text that particularly stood out to you. Sometimes, I will post specific prompts for you to answer. Rather than merely summarize or describe a specific aspect of the reading, you should play around with ideas; explicate what this or that concept did for your intellectual imagination; or reconstruct the lines of flight the text took you down as you digested a new way of looking at the world. These should be clearly written and well-organized thought experiments (no stream of consciousness writing), BUT, I don't want you spending any more than thirty minutes on them. They do not need to be the most polished piece of writing in your oeuvre. I want you to practice collating your ideas quickly and acutely, without too much fuss or agonizing. The point of this is to start practicing getting your thoughts in order with swiftness and verve, which is a key part of being an academic that many people do not train in: simply coming up with ideas on the fly and doing something with them that's inventive and thought provoking. That's ultimately your "magic trick," and a skill worth honing along with a variety of others.

## **Required Texts:**

The texts below are required. They are available for purchase at the University Bookstore or online. I recommend A Room of One's Own bookstore in Madison, Bookshop.org, BetterWorldBooks, Powell's Bookstore or other independent online retailers that support local booksellers. All texts marked with ^ in the syllabus will be available on Canvas and should be printed out and brought to class in physical form. All texts marked with \* are available in the *Selected Writings of Edward Said*.

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (2018 [1958])

Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (1972)

Edward Said, *The Selected Writings of Edward Said 1966-2006* (2019)

Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993)

Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (2007 [1970])

Toni Morrison, *Sula* (2004 [1973])

Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (2007 [1977])

Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (2004 [1988])

Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (2008)

This is a reading intensive, graduate theory seminar, which means you will need to manage your time well, plan ahead for each week of reading and viewing, and commit significant time to prepare for our discussions. Officially speaking: the credit standard for this course is met by an expectation of a total of 135 hours of student engagement with the course learning activities across the semester (at least 45 hours per credit), which include regularly scheduled meeting times, reading, writing, and other student work as described in the syllabus. That is roughly ten hours of work a week. If you are putting in this kind of time and still struggling to keep up with the course readings, we will thoughtfully trim assigned materials as we go along. At all times, the syllabus can be subject to change at my discretion as the instructor.

## **Attendance Policy: Attendance and participation at every class session**

**is mandatory.** That means not only showing up, but being awake, attentive, and actively engaged in our meetings. Most importantly, this includes coming to class having completed that day's reading (and viewing) assignments, taken careful notes on all these items, and prepared to engage in dialogue about them. I will grant each student one excused absence for any reason; all other unexcused absences will incur the 5% participation grade deduction listed above. **With this in mind, remember that anytime you miss a class session, you lose the opportunity to participate in a completely original intellectual event that can never be reproduced or adequately conveyed after the fact. This loss is no small thing.**

**Disability Support Services:** At all times, this seminar will be open and accessible to students with disabilities. If you are a student enrolled with the McBurney Disability Resource Center or have a disability but have not used the MDRC, I encourage you to speak with me regarding your rights to accommodation. Please come see me about any questions you have regarding additional support for your success in this class. For more information, contact MDRC, 702 W. Johnson Street, at 608-263-2741. Or refer to <https://mcburney.wisc.edu/>.

Reading schedule:

### **Week 1: Three Cosmopolitan Styles of Thought**

Monday, September 8

Toni Morrison, “Moral Inhabitants” (1976)

Edward Said, “The Return to Philology” (2006)

Hannah Arendt, “Introduction *into* Politics” (abridged)

### **Week 2: The Human Condition**

Monday, September 15

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958). Read prologue, and chapters I-II, V-VI.

### **Week 3: Confronting Atrocity**

Monday, September 22

Hannah Arendt, “Total Domination” and “Ideology and Terror: A Novel form of Government,” (1951)^

Hannah Arendt, “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship” (1964)^

Hannah Arendt, “On Violence,” (1970)

Deborah Nelson, “Hannah Arendt: Irony and Atrocity” (2017)^

Recommended viewing and reading:

*Civil War* (Garland, 2024) (available on HBO Max)

Ramzi Fawaz, “*Civil War*’s Unsentimental Imagination” (2024)^

### **Week 4: Founding, Promising, and Forgiving: The Fundamentals of Political Action**

Monday, September 29

Viewing: *Thelma & Louise* (Scott, 1991)

Hannah Arendt, “What is Freedom?” (1961)^

Hannah Arendt, “The Meaning of Revolution” (1963)^

Hannah Arendt, “Civil Disobedience” (1970)

Linda Zerilli, “Feminists Make Promises: The Milan Collective’s Sexual Difference and the Project of World-Building” (2005)^

### **Week 5: Imagination and Judgement: The Fundamentals of Representative Thinking**

Monday, October 6

Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and its Political Significance” (1961)^

Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics” (1961)^

Linda Zerilli, “Democracy and the Problem of Judgement” (2016)^

### **Week 6: The Exile’s Imagination**

Monday, October 13

Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile” (1984)^

Edward Said, “Traveling Theory” (1982)\*

Edward Said, “Traveling Theory Reconsidered” (1994)^

Edward Said, “The Politics of Knowledge” (1991)^

### **Week 7: Worldliness**

Monday, October 20

Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983). Read introduction, and chapters 1, 4-9, 12, and Conclusion.

### **Week 8: The Struggle for Representation**

Monday, October 27

Edward Said, “Zionism from the Standpoint of its Victims” (1979)\*

Hannah Arendt, “Zionism Reconsidered” (1945)^

Edward Said, from *Orientalism* (1970)\*

“Introduction”

“The Scope of Orientalism”

Edward Said, “Permission to Narrate” (1984)\*

Recommended viewing: Charlie Rose Interview with Edward Said (1994):  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OAu-52feMS8>>

### **Week 9: Culture and Imperialism**

Monday, November 3

Edward Said, from *Culture and Imperialism* (1993)

“Introduction”^

“Jane Austen and Empire”\*

“Yeats and Decolonization”\*

Ramzi Fawaz, “Tripping on Mushrooms with Edward Said: The Case for Literary Studies as Holistic Medicine” (2025)^

### **Week 10: The Bluest Eye**

Monday, November 10

Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970)

Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (1992)

Recommended viewing: Charlie Rose Interview with Toni Morrison (1993):  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QyGI0RbPgv4>>

### **Week 11: Sula**

Monday, November 17

Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973)

Barbara Smith, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” (1978)^

### **Week 12: Song of Solomon**

Monday, November 24

Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (1977)

**Week 13: Beloved**

Monday, December 1

Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987)

**Week 14: A Mercy**

Monday, December 8

Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (2008)

Stephen Best, “On Failing to Make the Past Present” (2012)^