

# feminist philosophies of life:

## a podcast class

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### course overview

This course explores feminist philosophies of life. We'll read feminist science studies, disability studies, critical race studies, trans studies and other lively sites of feminist philosophy. By focusing on the study of "life" in feminist philosophy, we will consider the *stakes* of making sense of life (biological life, as well as experiential life). We'll really strive to foreground this interplay between the affective, embodied aspects of life lived in the first person and third-person accounts of life.

We'll do this by experimenting with new approaches to learning feminist philosophy; in particular, we'll work together to create audio-essays that stage and animate questions about inheritance & heredity, evolution & emergence, sex & "race" & sexuality. These essays will incorporate first-person reflections, as well as conceptual or theoretical analysis. As a new form of feminist philosophy, our audio-essays will test the very import of feminist philosophy for pressing concerns about justice, politics, education and other vital dimensions of life.

### course texts

These are the books for this course.

1. *Feminist Philosophies of Life*, ed. Chloë Taylor & Hasana Sharp (McGill-Queens, 2016)
2. Michelle Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minnesota, 2015)
3. Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (South End Press, 2011)
4. Alison Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip* (Indiana, 2013)

*Additional suggested reading:*

Jessica Abel, *Out on the Wire: The Storytelling Secrets of the New Masters of Radio* (Broadway Books, 2015)

*Audio essays*

We'll be listening to episodes of podcasts throughout the semester, learning from their design elements and drawing out resonances with our assigned readings. It's an excellent idea to consider subscribing to these podcasts so that they are easily accessible on your phones or other devices.

## course policies & assignments

### Accessibility

This course is committed to the principles of universal design in learning, which include flexibility, equitability, tolerance for error, and productive feedback loops. You are invited to comment at any time during the semester (in person or by email) about the ways in which the space, assignments, curriculum and other key elements of the course are contributing to or impeding inclusion and accessibility. In addition, in order to access institutionalized forms of academic accommodation, you can contact Accessibility Services at 403-440-6868 to discuss academic accommodations for disability; you can also contact Diversity & Human Rights Services at 403-440-5956 if you require academic accommodations for other reasons.

One thing to know about our particular classroom space is that it will contain audio recorders. We'll talk a lot together about sound, recordings, and the consensual use of audio-clips, but this course will ask everyone to find some degree of comfort with the presence of audio-recording.

### Three Reading Responses

Philosophy involves a lot of reading; reading, in fact, is one of the main sources *of* philosophical learning. And so there will be assigned readings for every week's seminar. Remember, though, that this is a 2000-level course. This means that, while you're expected to do the reading, you're not expected to have landed on an interpretation of the "argument" or problems being elaborated in the assigned text. You can rest confident that I will be introducing and explaining the key ideas in class.

That said, however, since *reading* is such an important task of this course—along with seminar discussions—it seems right that at various points in the semester you will hand in thoughtful reading responses about the assigned readings. (These are the weeks, in other words, when you'll read the assigned texts more carefully and slowly). These reading responses should be *two* pages in length, and they are **due in class on the day of the assigned readings** (put the word count on the top of the first page! You should aim for around 600 words).

Remember that our course focuses on feminist philosophies of life. A close reading is much more productive when it is animated by an overarching and pressing question. Your question could be as simple as "what do 'life' or 'feminism' mean in the context of this reading?" Or it could be: how is a scientific understanding of life intersecting in this assigned reading with feminist, critical race, crip, queer or other philosophically committed projects? Or perhaps you have already landed on a pressing question of your own, and so that question can be used to illuminate crucial claims or problems in the reading. It's an *excellent* idea **to include direct quotations** from the assigned text in your response.

A reading response is a rigorous, subjective engagement with the assigned reading: illuminating crucial ideas, elaborating important concepts, adjudicating and weighing in on questions. Ultimately, this is a chance for you to render transparent (laying it out clearly in your own writing) what you think might be most significant about the reading. You're always welcome to use first-person to develop these two-page reflections.

The hope here is that you will be ready to help guide the seminar discussion on the day that you're handing in a reading response. Your responses will likely open up research questions and possible new lines of inquiry, ones that will be essential for our audio-essay project.

## Group Podcast Project

We will be very interested, in our assignments, in tracking our own emergent ideas, reflections and conversations. After all, this is exactly the kind of embodied process that we are studying in this course. And so there is one guiding question that will orient our work: what is interesting? “Interesting” means: we don’t know where it will take us.

In this course, we want to pay attention to what we find interesting! Audio-creators call this “writing out of tape”: to craft a relationship between narration and quotes from interviews. Writing *out* of the tape is what we do in philosophical writing, as well (finding key quotations from relevant essays and then sparking them into life in the context of our own analyses). In the context of podcasts, *writing out of tape* moves the story forward through the interplay between narration, excerpts from interviews and, of course, all kinds of other sounds. (For more, see *HowSound* podcast, “Writing out of Tape” episode). This is a lovely metaphor for what we do *in class*, as well: we pay attention to unexpected, interesting moments, we respond to them, or echo them, or resist them.

For this project, we will work in groups of around ten (this is totally negotiable, though). Each group will develop, create, produce and share an audio-essay (also known as a podcast episode), based on what you’ve discerned to be truly interesting. This audio-essay can vary in length (ranging from 8 minutes to 25 minutes), and there are many different creative possibilities for what each episode will sound like. That said, we’ll be working together to land on some *shared* formal design elements so that, as a whole, our episodes will work together to tell one broader story: the story of feminist philosophies of life. There will be a vast array of support and resources for this project, including research assistants who have backgrounds in audio journalism.

## The Podcast Pitch

Around halfway through the semester, each group will make a pitch, sharing their ideas, clips and design ideas for their audio-essay with the class. This podcast will be *about* philosophy, but the work of developing and producing it will also be, in essential ways, philosophical. Consider what one of leading writers on radio, Jessica Abel, says about the task of audio-writing: “taking a bunch of unconnected anecdotes—or ideas—or bits of tape—and forming them into an arc is a very complex and difficult job. Even if you’ve got a focus sentence all worked out, how do you get from here to there” (*Out on the Wire*, 112)? The answer to this question is *structure*: finding structure for the tape; discerning the right order that will link recordings together with ideas. And this is what philosophy entails as well: drawing out the structure of sound, critical, rigorous and productive lines of thought.

There are other key parallels between (good) radio and (good) philosophy: they each provide a reason for a story to exist, a reason that others find compelling; they open up ideas in ways that actually enable listeners/readers to experience, from their own first-person, new ways of understanding something; they *require* the input of others. This latter point is why we will be setting aside time for the podcast pitch: we will need others to help us notice what is most interesting, what is most likely to translate into important experiences for listeners.

Through this project, we will be working to decentre the usual workings of authority in our classroom. Instead of writing to the test (ie. working to submit the essay that a professor seems to want), we will be opening up our process to each other—through the pitch and the subsequent editing. This, too, is essentially philosophical. As Jessica Abel comments, “Edits are where you find solutions to problems you may not have even known you had” (*Out on the Wire*, 185). Edits emerge from others’ responses to our work. And it’s through this immanent, engaged work of creative dialogue that we will discover our key stories, insights and questions.

## Self-Reflection & Critique

One of the lessons of creative work involves the thinking that comes afterwards. You'll write a self-reflection and critique of the audio-essay, which will be due in exam week. We'll discuss this exercise in class together so that its parameters are clear and reasonable. Its exact make-up will depend upon the specific tasks that you decided to take up, in the context of the podcast group project (ie. researching, interviewing, recording, writing, editing).

## course assessment

Three 2-page responses: 15% each

Podcast pitch: 20%

Group Project: 15%

Self-Reflection & Critique: 20%

## reading schedule

Lesson	assigned readings	assigned audio	deadlines
Lesson 1	Introduction		
Lesson 2	Jörg Niewöhner, "Epigenetics: Localizing biology through co-laboration"; Erin Manning, "10 Propositions for a Radical Pedagogy"	<i>HowSound</i> podcast, "Producing Personal Pieces: Stephanie Foo"	
Lesson 3	Michelle Wright, "Introduction," <i>Physics of Blackness</i> (1-36); Claudia Rankine & Beth Loffreda, "Introduction," <i>The Racial Imaginary</i> ; Stephanie Foo's Manifesto, "What to Do if your Workplace is Too White," <i>Transom</i>	<i>Sampler</i> podcast, "episode 1: Magic & Tonic"	
Lesson 4	Alison Kafer, "At the Same Time, Out of Time: Ashley X," <i>Feminist Queer Crip</i> (47-68); Stephanie Jenkins, "Defining Morally Considerable Life: Toward a Feminist Disability Ethic," <i>Feminist Philosophies of</i>	<i>This American Life</i> , "Tell Me I'm Fat"	

*Life* (199-216)

- Lesson 5 Dean Spade, “Preface,” *Normal Life* (7-18);  
Lisa Guenther, “Life Behind Bars: The Eugenic Structure of Mass Incarceration,” *Feminist Philosophies of Life*
- HowSound*: “A mom, a transgender daughter and a podcast”;  
*Benjamin Walker’s Theory of Everything*: “Transformers (r)” (assigned: first 17 minutes of episode; be aware of violent content & feel free to opt out of listening)
- Make podcast groups, based on shared thematic interests
- Lesson 6 Michelle Wright, “Quantum Baldwin and the Multidimensionality of Blackness,” *Physics of Blackness* (109-140: especially 109-113);  
James Baldwin, “On Being White” and “Every Good-bye Ain’t Gone”
- Politically ReActive*: “Pastor Michael McBride Says Stop Reaching for Whiteness”
- Lesson 7 Lynne Huffer, “Foucault’s Fossils,” *Feminist Philosophies of Life* (85-107);  
Stephen Seely, “Does Life Have a Sex?” *Feminist Philosophies of Life* (108-125)
- Radiolab*, “From Tree to Shining Tree”
- Lesson 8 Seminar devoted to podcast pitches by groups
- Podcast Pitch due
- Lesson 9 Reading Week
- Lesson 10 Alison Kafer, “A Future for Whom?” *Feminist Queer Crip* (86-102);  
Ada Jaarsma, “Design, Disability and Play”
- HowSound*: “Tinkering with Sound Design”  
*Teaching Strides*, “Teaching Personally Challenging Material”
- [note that the next readings were chosen based on the students’ chosen topics for their audio essays]

Lesson 11	Casey Plett, “Voice,” <i>McSweeneys</i> and short stories from <i>A Safe</i> <i>Girl to Love</i>  “The Literary Renaissance of Trans Women Writers,” Katherine Cross, <i>Bitch Magazine</i> Nov 21, 2014	<i>Woodland Secrets</i> , “Casey Plett”	
Lesson 12	“The Politics of Framing: An Interview with Nancy Fraser,” Kate Nash & Vikki Bell; Astra Taylor, “Unschooling”	<i>Colour Code</i> , “Eggsbells”	
Lesson 13	Share audio essays in class		Audio essays due

# Epigenetics

## the biology & pedagogy of “learning”

Readings for today:

Jörg Niewöhner, “Epigenetics: Localizing biology through co-laboration”

Erin Manning, “10 Propositions for a Radical Pedagogy”

**Key Words:**

- “the material turn”
- “epigenetics”
- “learning” & “interesting”
- “co-laboration”

“The individual, skin-bound, autonomously and rationally captained body is replaced by a body that is heavily impregnated with its social and material environment” -- Jörg Niewöhner (2015, 224).

“Don't look too hard for the through-thread. Don't worry too much about drawing a line. **Make learning a weave**”—Erin Manning (2015)

“Dynamism is not something that lends itself to being analyzed with the static technology of the map.” How do we *translate* the uncertainty and variability of a complex phenomenon (like social difference & its embodiment) into clearly defined, replicable experiments? –Niewöhner (2015, 221, 226)

### 1. epigenetics

- Definitions:
  - “Epigenetics seeks to explain how, starting from an identical set of genes, the contingencies of development can lead to different outcomes” (Steven Rose, 2016).
  - Life is *local*, responsive to ecologies & environments: for example, “social position leaves molecular traces” (Niewöhner 220, 225).

(watch short video in class: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/2016/09/09/steven-rose/video-on-epigenetic-experiments> )

- initial questions: what is a “heresy”? what *makes* something heretical? What's the import of calling something a heresy?

*Initial reading (from Steven Rose):*

- “Modern biology, at its conception in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, inherited one unshakeable belief, two mysteries and an unfortunate error of timing. **The belief** was in the immutability of species, that each species has essential, unalterable characteristics, which can be traced back at least as far as Aristotle. **The mysteries** were, first, over what it is about life that distinguishes it from death, and second, the process by which a fully developed organism, be it chicken or human, emerges from a fertilized egg. The first mystery was solved, tautologically, by answering that creatures were animate rather than inanimate because they were infused with the breath of life. The second mystery, the chicken & egg problem, was a matter for dispute: was the final adult form of the organism in some way present in miniature in the egg or sperm (preformationism), or did it develop by stages from an original formless mass (epigenesis)? These questions may have been reformulated over the centuries, but they are still at the heart of the life sciences. The unfortunate **error of timing**, which made the questions harder to answer, was that biology developed as a science later than physics [and Newtonian physics taught scientists who approach living processes as if they were mechanical systems]” (Steven Rose, 2016).
- Steven Rose, *London Review of Books* video: “There have been real problems in understanding the relationship between *genetics, development and evolution*. . . . Everyone knows that, according to Darwin, natural selection is a *slow* process whereby organisms, as a result of *random mutation* in genes, the fitter of the organisms will survive and propagate their own. But there was a long-lasting heresy, which predates Darwin. . . . that experiences during the lifetime of an organism can also be inherited, transmitted to the next generation.”
  - famous evolutionary theorists: Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829)
  - Conrad Hal Waddington (coined “epigenetics” in 1930s)

- *Drosophila* experiment: “the experience during the development of the organism have actually been transmitted heritably to its offspring...” “More and more evidence began to accumulate that this could be the case.... [experiments with diet]. This is **epigenetic inheritance**.... This is *not* a Darwinian heresy.... But it is a heresy so far as hard-line molecular reductionists and molecular geneticists are concerned. It’s become known as the extended evolutionary synthesis.”
  - The modern evolutionary synthesis: Darwin’s natural selection (mutations over time) + Gregor Mendel’s genetics (genes & inheritance)
  - Extended evolutionary synthesis: complex, systems-level emergence; eco-evo-devo theories
- More definitions:
  - Epigenetics: “mechanisms of gene regulation that do not involve changes in DNA sequence.... More likely, perhaps **the question will shift from a dichotomous ‘yes/no’** [is there trans-generational inheritance of epigenetic patterns?] to a more differentiated **‘how important** is trans-generational epigenetic inheritance in what contexts?” (Niewöhner 220, 223).
  - DNA is not a naked molecule but is wrapped in histones which have to be peeled off before a particular length of DNA can be read (“**acetylation**”: gene-activating mechanism); DNA can be “marked” with methyl groups that *prevent* the DNA from being read (“**methylation**”: gene-silencing mechanism). (There have been experiments, for example, linking trauma to methylation marks).

## 2. Propositions for a Radical Pedagogy (How to Rethink Value)

- Start in the middle! Listen to where value is still in the forming!
  - Teachers tend to *stage* the classroom as if *their* (or our) entrance is the start of learning. “What is lost in this gesture? What is left unheard?” (Manning)
  - Refuse to call the class to order! (The call to order: the accumulation of credit). “The soundscape of learning is full of inklings which reside below the threshold of actual perception. Think of the site for learning as encompassing what it cannot quite articulate, and **listen to what that sounds like, even if you can’t quite hear it. It makes a difference**” (Manning)
  - “When we refuse the call to order—the teacher picking up the book, the conductor raising his baton, the speaker asking for silence, the torturer tightening the noose—we refuse order as the distinction between noise and music, chatter and knowledge, pain and truth” (Fred Moten & Stefano Harvey, 9)
  - “Value what is in excess of curriculum, the unknowable **as heard in the interstices of the uneasy soundscape** which is the ever overflowing classroom. **Listen here, where value is still in the forming**” (Manning).
- Beyond Value! Beyond Evaluation!
 

“How could we possibly know what will be of value in a time yet to be invented? Even capital doesn’t present to know this” – Manning

  - The student has a bad habit: she studies! She studies but does not learn (if she learned, they could measure her progress, give her credit. She just isn’t interested in what credit promises. She doesn’t want to quantify interest). But she keeps studying: she reads and speaks and dreams her studies. The classroom is only one of the sites where she invents and explores. “She is the student you learn from, as long as you are willing to similarly resist the call to order.” “Like all life-long learners, she knows about the magic of the verge.” The verge has the potential for creating *new* forms of value.
  - “How to teach such a student who learns beyond, who learns despite evaluation? The student who feels so strongly and follows the feeling?” By celebrating the fact that “we do not know where a thought can take us.” “What we need is not a new classroom, not new students, but new techniques to orient perception.”
  - “A pragmatics of the useless is **pragmatic** in the sense that it is absolutely engaged with what is in the world, right now, and **speculative** in the sense that it is open to transformation by the potentializing force of where study can take us.”
  - The “useful” is usually what can be articulated, shared & apprehended, measured; the “useless” defies measure. “Yet it is this very unmeasurability that gives experience its value.”
- Thought is in the Bodying!

- Thought isn't first in the mind; it is in the bodying. "And bodying is always in an ecology of practices." Learning happens through us, with us. "Thought now begins to coincide with the **most creative definition of philosophy**, philosophy that asks *how*, and *what else?*"
- "Each thinking in the act must invent its own practices for learning," its own techniques for cultivating philosophy as practice ("a practice that thinks," as Gilles Deleuze puts it)—the creation of practices "that foreground **how learning creates its own value.**"

### 3. Co-Laboration

- How different can we really be and still work together to produce critical, new knowledge? (For eg, Niewöhner describes his interactions, as an anthropologist, with scientists in their own lab).
  - Scientists: are searching for law-like rules about biology. They need to purify their laboratory work; they need to locate *proxies* that have statistical significance and ecological validity (and they approach their work with these criteria in mind). They need large sample sizes, for example, and must demonstrate standardized methods.
  - Anthropologists: are really interested in the universality and particularity of the human body
  - Feminist philosophers: are perhaps beautifully situated to make connections between these two approaches?
- Co-laboration: temporary & transient, joint epistemic work; experimental & emergent. It's not about convincing others that you're right! And there isn't a known outcome, figured out in advance. It's also not a straightforwardly-shared agenda.
- Here's a pressing hope: that *the ontological status of one discipline's research object* might actually change through engagement with another (Niewöhner 233).
  - Changing the research object's ontological status!
    - This is a radical, experimental hope.
  - Could *interesting* mark the conditions of possibility for this kind of radical change?
    - Can we create co-laborative, experimental spaces "where participants could try each other's ways of being in the world.... Exchange concepts, theoretical lenses and methods" (236)? To "see like a biologist"—or even to "**see like a student.**"

### references

- Manning, Erin. 2015. "10 Propositions for a Radical Pedagogy," *Inflections: A Journal for Research Creation*. 8: 202-208.
- Moten, Fred & Stefano Harvey. 2013. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. New York: Minor Compositions.
- Niewöhner, Jörg. 2015. "Epigenetics: Localizing biology through co-laboration," *New Genetics and Society* 34(2): 219-242.
- Rose, Steven. 2016. "How to Get Another Thorax," *London Review of Books* 38(17): 15-17.

# The Racial Imaginary

## race, whiteness, inheritance

... there is nothing 'biological' about race...

... when arguments are "raceless,"  
they are not neutral but privilege whiteness and  
endorse enormous amounts of violence and discrimination...  
"Just 4.78 % of newsroom employees are black. 13.34% are minorities"  
(Stephanie Foo).

### PHIL 2237 Lesson 2: Racial Imaginary

Readings for today:

- Beth Loffreda & Claudia Rankine, "Introduction," *The Racial Imaginary*
- Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness* (pp 1-35)
- Stephanie Foo, "What to Do if your Workplace is Too White," *Transom.org*

**Key Words:**

- "the racial imaginary"
- "race"
- "whiteness"
- "the now"

### today's theme:

- "If collective Black identities are **historical**, how do we unravel the warp and woof of this history?" (Wright, 7). "Writing could be said to rest on the faith that there is something of value in **witnessing an individual mind speaking in and to its ordinary history**" (Loffreda & Rankine, 14). "Every act of imagination has its limits, but perhaps a way to expand those limits is to "inhabit, as intensely as possible, **the moment in which the imagination's sympathy encounters its limit**. To see what that shows you that you have not yet seen. Or: to realize one might also make strange what seems obvious, nearby, close" (Loffreda & Rankine, 17).
- Let's bear witness, then, to racial subjectivities (20). But here are two problems:
- 1. "Blackness evanesces, revealing no **one shared quality** that justifies such frequent and assured use of this signifier. ... Blackness was not a scientific discovery but an economic and political argument first used to justify the Atlantic slave trade. ... Yet to understand Blackness as a construct without explaining what it is—only what it is not—generates old and new paradoxes in our arguments" (Wright, 2- 3).
- 2. A central quality of Whiteness: "they know that they are white, but they must not know what they know. They know that they are white, but they cannot know that such a thing has social meaning; they know that they are white, but they must not know that their whiteness accrues power. They must not call it whiteness for to do so would be to acknowledge its force. They must instead feel themselves to be individuals **upon whom nothing has acted**" (Loffreda & Rankine, 20). Whiteness "has made them unknowing." "The universal is a fantasy. But we are captive, still, to a sensibility that champions the universal while simultaneously **defining the universal, still, as white**" (22).

### recap from last week

- epigenetics:
  - "Our experiences affect what our genes do" (Moore 2015, 56), including the experiences of our ancestors.
  - There are heritable traits that don't involve changes to the DNA sequence information: the "epi-genome." And so we can (and should) reject all forms of "genetic determinism."
  - genes are silenced or activated; genes are, in essence, responsive! Molecular biology has found two "links" between nature & nurture: methylation and histone acetylation. A "methylated" gene is a silenced gene; histone acetylation is a gene-activating mechanism)
  - *3 examples of epigenetic development:* Identical twins aren't identical! Bees differentiate into queen and worker bees! Maybe methylation (one of the key mechanisms for epigenetics) is the reason for the differences between modern humans and Neanderthals! (Moore 2015, 58).
  - The effects of trauma, violence and adversity extend *biologically* to future generations. "biology must be understood as situated to the same extent as are sociohistorical forces" (Lock 2013, 1897)

*Connections with today's lesson:* 1. we need *other* logics of causality than determinist genes or other “fixed origins” (Wright, 26); 2. our minds & bodies are entangled (our imaginations aren't a part from our embedded situations and so we need to find ways to think them together: who is *represented*, what bodies & which aspects of lived experience are bracketed or highlighted?); 3. we need ways to recognize and render “difference”.

## I. There is no gene for “race”!

- “Contrary to the assertion that Blackness comprises a set of genetic qualities, decades of research have born no fruit confirming this often-repeated claim” (Wright, 2).
  - Our species is the most homogenous species: we are only 200,000 years old. For comparison: our genus, *homo*, is 2-3 million years old; around 50 million years ago, whales emerged; 25 million years ago, apes split off from old world monkeys. Around 100,000 years ago, there *were* other upright walking ape species (*homo naledi* was just discovered in South African caves), like of course Neanderthals, who all went extinct.
  - What counts as ‘black’ or ‘white’ is different in America from South Africa.
  - Stephen Jay Gould: the classification of ‘race’ is entirely cultural. Race is an idea, not a biological phenomenon.
  - For contrast: Richard Lewontin’s 1972 study: complex traits can be found in any human population. There’s *as much* variation within populations as across population-divides.
  - Variation through time: genetic mutations like northern populations that lost the ability to create dark melatonin (a theory: people needed as much light as possible). Around the globe, we find populations with continuous changes in skin tone.
- It’s a “spurious” or non-scientific claim to connect race with biological or genetic markers.
- It’s *not sufficient* to only invoke progress narratives (in which causality is predictive and temporality is linear). There is *also* the present moment which is embodied (Epiphenomenal time), the moment of interpretation, the now (Wright, 4-5, 20). “[T]ime does not flow forward in a linear fashion—that is, as a progress narrative” (16). “[A]ny one given moment of the ‘now’ contains several viable possibilities” (24). And so let’s inquire not only about the *what* but also the *when & where* (“a ‘what’ cannot occupy several spacetimes at once”) (25).

## II. The Racial Imaginary

- “The goal of this book is to provide a model for defining Blackness across the Diaspora that easily locates and corrects the common exclusions so often found in our everyday speech, scholarly canon and public assumptions” (Wright, 5).
- “A writer’s imagination is also the place where **a racial imaginary**—conceived before she came into being yet deeply lodged in her own mind—takes up residence. And the disentangling and harnessing of these things is the writer’s endless and unfinishable but not fruitless task. Another way of saying this: **the writer’s essential strangeness** is her greatest resource, yet she must also be in skeptical tension with her own inclinations. Because those inclinations are in part **an inheritance from a racial imaginary that both is and is not hers**” (Loffreda & Rankine, 21).
- *Temporality & Embodied Experience:*
  - “We are all, no matter how little we like it, the bearers of unwanted and often shunned memory, of a history whose infiltrations are at times so stealthy we can pretend otherwise, and at times so loud we can’t hear much of anything else. We’re still there—there differently than those before us, but **there, otherwise known as here** (Loffreda & Rankine, 13).
  - “Race is one of the prime ways in which history thrives in us.... To argue that the imagination is or can be **somehow free of race** ... acts as if the imagination is not **part of me**, is not created by the same web of history and culture that made ‘me’.... Our imaginations are creatures **as limited as we ourselves are**” (14, 15, 16).
  - The *now* of imagination and interpretation (Wright, 14).
- *Violence & injury:*
  - “**Racism, in its very daily-ness, in its very variety of expression, isn’t fixed.** It’s there, and then it’s not there, and then it’s there again” (Loffreda & Rankine, 18).
  - “There is something truly soul-destroying in the repeated discursive erasure from or marginalization of vulnerable identities” (Wright, 14).

- *Whiteness*:
  - “White writers often begin from a place where transcendence is a given—one already has access to all, one already is permitted to inhabit all, to address all. The crisis comes when one’s address is questioned. For writers of colour, transcendence can feel like a distant and elusive thing, because writers of colour often begin from the place of being addressed, and accessed. To be a person of colour in a racist culture **is to be always addressable**... and to be addressable means one is always within stigma’s reach” (Loffreda & Rankine, 16).
  - The *whiteness* of whiteness: “The imagination is a free space, and I have the right to imagine from the point of view of anyone I want—it is against the nature of art itself to place limits on who or what I can imagine.’ **This language of rights** is as extraordinary as it is popular, and it is striking to see how many white writers in particular conceive of race and the creative imagination as the question of whether **they feel they are permitted** to write a character, or a voice, or a persona, ‘of colour.’ This is a decoy... [that] itself points **to the whiteness of whiteness**—that to write race would be to write ‘colour,’ to write an other” (15).
  - But a white writer *could* think about and expose the racial dynamic—“what white artists might do is not imaginatively inhabit the other because that is their right artists, but **instead embody and examine the interior landscape that wishes to speak of rights**, that wishes to move freely and unbounded across time, space and lines of power, that wishes to inhabit whomever it chooses. Or that wishes to absent from view whomever it chooses” (17).
  - “White fragility” (DiAngelo 2011): “This is how the white mind tends to racial ‘wounds’—it makes a mistake about who or what has dealt the injury. For it is not the reader of colour who deals the injury. It is whiteness itself. ... **And thus whiteness goes only briefly contested**. ... And whiteness gathers to itself again its abiding centrality, its authority, its rights. Its sanity” (19).
  - Stephanie Foo on a too-white workplace: “We feel an obligation to speak up and represent our people if we hear something that could be construed as offensive. So we say something, but instead of taking the comment for what it is—an edit—some might see the comment as a call-out.” She interviews Lam Thuy Vo: “the comments get shut down real fast, the room becomes silent, and one or two people get extremely angry, like ‘Why are you saying this? Why are you causing trouble?’ it’s like, okay, fine, I back off—but now, I’m not going to say anything next time.”

Watch three videos in class:

1. The Atlantic Slave Trade in 2 minutes: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6KYQNXXZwMI>
2. *New York Times op-doc* “A Conversation with Black Women about Race”: <http://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000004050379/a-conversation-with-black-women-on-race.html>
3. Rashaad Newsome: *Shade Compositions* (SF Moma 2012): <http://rashaadnewsome.com/#work/performance/shade-compositions-sfmoma-2012>

Claudia Rankine: “[The Shade Compositions] are notable for their successes in depicting the recognizable outrage and disbelief performed routinely and silently by black women’s bodies, given their historical relationship to power, the moments why they ‘throw shade.’... His mock sympathies presuppose the moment that make necessary these compositions.” They suggest “that our body’s stance is all of the articulation we need” (2014).

Michelle Wright: “We are a series of performances in distinct moments” (34).

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- Lock, Margaret. 2013. “The lure of the epigenome,” *The Lancet* 381: 1896-1897
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- Rankine, Claudia. 2014. “An Interview with Lauren Berlant,” *Bomb Magazine* 129.

Readings for today:

- “Tell me I’m Fat” *This American Life*
- Alison Kafer, “At the Same Time, Out of Time: Ashley X,” *Feminist Queer Crip*
- Stephanie Jenkins, “Defining Morally Considerable Life,” *Feminist Philosophies of Life*

**Key Words:** • “health & morality”  
• “futures”  
• “disability”

## futurity, morality, disability: “what makes life liveable?”

“Ableism functions as an interpretative frame through which marginal others are excluded from the moral community” (Jenkins, 212).

Debates hinge upon “disagreements about the nature of disability and what makes a life liveable” (Jenkins, 208).

### Our audio project:

- Pay attention to your attention!
  - Sounds: music; a range of voices; an arc from one moment to another. “*This American Life* is designed to be heard, not read... [because of the] emotion and emphasis that’s not on the page.”
  - Consider beginning to record yourself, your conversations, the spaces around you.
- Next week: make 3 groups, organized around shared thematic interests.

### 1. Health & Morality (This American Life, “Tell me I’m fat”)

Ira: “How old were you when you first came out?”

Lindy: “It just felt impolite to talk about, like me not wanting to burden you with my failure.”

Ira: “Like, I’m not going to bother you with this.”

Lindy: “Yeah, and just give me a little more time. Let’s not talk about it, and I promise I’ll fix it... The way that we are taught to think about fatness is that fat is not a permanent state. You’re just a thin person who’s failing consistently for your whole life.”

- What’s *moral* about “health”? what are the many & varied ways that health is systematically *moralized*?
  - Why is it so “radical”, as Ira puts it, to “come out as fat”? why does Lindy need to stop Ira and correct his use of the word “overweight”? why is Lindy praised for her “confidence”?
- What are strategies for prompting people to “unlearn” their moralizing habits?
  - Did Lindy successfully challenge Dan Savage to transform his assumptions about bodies, health & normativity?
  - How did Lindy herself begin to “unlearn”? Lindy: “I remember **feeling like my brain was changing shape**.... It wasn’t just conceptual...”
  - Leonard Nimoy’s “The Full Body Project”: photographs of a burlesque group in San Francisco. Nimoy explained, “Heather MacAllister, who formed the group, was an anthropologist by training. And during one of our sessions, I said to her, what are you doing with your anthropological training? And she said, I’m doing this, meaning this Fat-Bottom Revue. And she went on further to say, whenever a fat person steps on stage to perform, and it’s not the butt of a joke, that’s a political statement. And I found that quite profound.”

## 2. Futurity

Ira: In talking about this show, “we come to the subject of fat suits. And one of our staffers, Elna Baker, blurted out, if she put on one of those today, she’d feel like herself again.”

Elna: “Of course, I’d lost the weight to fix two specific problems. I wanted to get a job and find love. Old Elna looked for a job for a year and a half. New Elna was offered work a month after she hit her goal weight, an entry-level position on an actual TV show. I was hired to be a page at the Letterman show.”

- What role does an “**imagined future**” play in Elna’s transformation?
- How does she sustain this bodily change?
- How does her transition cause her to see the world differently? What does she discover at the Letterman show, for example? Or at the grocery store?
- Elna: “Old Elna longed for someone like Andy and never got him. She tried so hard for everything that I now got so easily. New Elna didn’t have to be a good person.... It’s just **such an unbalanced reward system**. It took so much more kindness, hard work, and ingenuity to be a person in the world when I was fat. All this took was not eating.”

What does “futurity” mean in the context of normative health prescriptions?

1. Development: one-way, linear march “upward”. (If there’s a problem with development, it can and should be fixed!). Normal adulthood is a time of, and defined by, productivity (Kafer 54).
  2. Your imagined future can be held against you. Ashley X faced “a future of no future” (Kafer 54).
    - Kafer: “reshaping children’s bodies without their consent,” holding Ashley’s *imagined* future body against her, using it as a justification for the treatment” (49).
    - “[Ashley] was embodied asynchrony; her mind and body were out of sync. By arresting the growth of Ashley’s body, the Treatment could stop this gap between mind and body from growing any wider” (48). Ashley’s “disconnect,” her developmental disjuncture, required intervention (53).
- Alison Kafer uses the phrase “crip futurity” to refer to a dissonant, queer, non-normative approach to the future. It is a real question: is it even possible to “crip” the future?
    - “how to imagine desirably disabled futures” (49)
    - How to resist and undermine “a curative response to disability” (57).

## 3. Disability & the Curative Imaginary

Ira: “does God want you thin? Some people think so.... There is this moral dimension to it that is just gross—this idea that you’re fat because you’re weak, you can’t get control of your own life.”

“Ashley had to be cured of her asynchrony, at least to the fullest extent possible. She also had to be freed of the specter of her future body, the full-sized, large-breasted, menstruating and fertile body to come” (57).

“the attempt to draw bright lines between classes of disability is rarely successful; one person’s ‘severe’ may be another’s ‘moderate’ or ‘mild.’” (59).

Curative responses are also often *privatizing* responses: quality of life is described, by others, as “self-evident”.... But “if a disabled person has never been given any kind of adaptive therapy or training, or if someone has no access to adaptive equipment (or only to substandard equipment), then one’s function might be much lower than one’s ability. Quality of life, then, is affected by **one’s access to resources and bodies of knowledge** rather than a necessary fact of the body/mind. Indeed, descriptions of another’s pain and suffering often rely more on **assumption** than fact, as do presumptions about what level of function is required for a good quality of life” (63).

We need to be open to the unknowability (64). And give up the “god’s eye view,” the “god trick of seeing everything from nowhere,” making decisions free from bias or subjective opinion.” (60).

Kafer writes, “I am haunted by that unknown” (66).

Readings for today:

- Dean Spade, “Preface,” *Normal Life*
- Lisa Guenther, “Life Behind Bars: The Eugenic Structure of Mass Incarceration,” *Feminist Philosophies of Life*
- “A mom, a transgender daughter & a podcast,” *HowSound* podcast
- “Transformers(ε)” *Benjamin Walker’s Theory of Everything* podcast

**Key Words:**

- structures & relational subjectivities
- “eugenic”
- “carceral”

## carceral-eugenic complex: structures & relational subjectivities

“In other words, the structure of the current US prison system is **fundamentally eugenic**.... There need not be an explicit, or even implicit, eugenic *intention* behind this structure for it to function as such” (Lisa Guenther, 218, 227).

“The *Sylvia Rivera Law Project* works to guarantee that all people are free to self-determine gender identity and expression, regardless of income or race, and without facing harassment, discrimination or violence” (*Sylvia Rivera Law Project*: <http://srlp.org/>)

### Structures/ Systems & Relational Subjectivities

- “Jim’s gender and body status and his inability to successfully navigate the gender requirements of the extremely violent systems in which he was **entangled**—because of his involvement in criminalized activity stemming from his poverty—was considered part of his criminality and a blameworthy status” (Spade 9). Spade calls this the “**criminal punishment system**” (11).
- “Biological and social reproduction are not separate processes but rather are **intertwined and mutually implicating**.... We are engaged in social reproduction—in other words, we propagate, modulate, resist, and reject the patterns of others—both in particular moments of biological reproduction and in our everyday live more generally” (Guenther 219).
- “**legal declarations of ‘equality’** are often tools for maintaining stratifying social and economic arrangements.... Furthermore, the shifting discourse and strategy of lesbian and gay rights work toward privatization, criminalization, and militarization have caused it to be incorporated into the neoliberal agenda in ways that not only ignore, but also directly disserve and further endanger and marginalize, those most vulnerable to regimes of homophobia and state violence” (Spade 14-15).

### Eugenics:

- There is a key structural element to eugenics: “**the opposition between the fit and unfit**, the normal and abnormal, the valued and devalued. While negative and positive eugenics programs differ in their emphasis, they also imply one another. The more abnormal groups reproduce, the less favourable the environment becomes for normal groups to live, thrive and reproduce; likewise, the greater and stronger the normal population is, the lower the chances of abnormality taking root and proliferating” (Guenther 220).
- “feminist reproductive politics may unwittingly **perpetuate** the structure of eugenic policies, which pit the interests of a valued and normalized group against the survival of the devalued and abnormalized” (Guenther 222).

### Carceral:

- “The carceral-eugenic structure of mass incarceration produces two classes of people: normal and abnormal, valued and devalued, product and waste” (229).
- A carceral-eugenic complex: “it not only manages populations rendered unproductive by neoliberal economic reforms, but also controls their reproductive capacities, focusing most intensely on poor women of colour, both on the streets and behind bars” (Guenther 227).

### Reproductive justice:

- “the eugenic structure of past and present reproductive policies does not just *disadvantage* black reproduction; it also *advantages* and incentivizes white reproduction through everything from tax credits for middle-class families (and welfare cuts for indigent families) to expensive in vitro fertilization services marketed toward white women. Again, **the challenge is not to expand the circle of privilege**, as if hypervaluation were an uncomplicated good, and as if it could ever take place without a correlative hyperdevaluation of another group; rather, the challenge is to transform the eugenic structure of reproductive injustice by centering

the perspectives of those who are most directly affected by it and dismantling those structures under their leadership” (Guenther 229).

- “Reproductive Justice aims to transform power inequities and create long-term systemic change, and therefore *relies on the leadership of communities most impacted by reproductive oppression*. The reproductive justice framework recognizes that all individuals are part of communities and that our strategies must lift up entire communities to support individuals”: Expanding the Movement for Empowerment and Reproductive Justice (EMERJ) (cited Guenther 231).

# James Baldwin, Agency & the nature of interpretation

## PHIL 2237 Lesson 5

Readings for today:

- Michelle Wright, “Quantum Baldwin and the Multidimensionality of Blackness” (esp pp 109-113)
- James Baldwin, “On Being White—and Other Lies”
- James Baldwin, “Every Good-Bye Ain’t Gone”
- “Pastor Michael McBride says Stop Reaching for Whiteness,” *Politically Re-Active* podcast

**Key Words:** • relational subjectivity  
• learning/ unlearning  
• agency • interpretation

“In **reacting against** what the world calls you, you endlessly validate its judgement.... No one, no matter how it may seem, simply *endures* his circumstances. If we are what our circumstances make us, **we are, also, what we make of our circumstances**. This is, perhaps, the key to history since **we are history**, and since the tension of which I am speaking is so silent and so private, **with effects so unforeseeable**, and so public”—James Baldwin (Every Good-bye Ain’t Gone, 775-76).

“one does not always behave as one wishes.” Agency is an ambivalent possession, but a possession nonetheless—Michelle Wright (116).

### Politically Re-Active, “Pastor Michael McBride”

- (listen to a selection in class, starting at 6.48) [notice the framing, editing & juxtaposition of “tape”]
  - Pastor Mike: “it’s always difficult to talk about race.... people want to believe a beautiful lie, rather than life with the ugly truth. Race is robbing every single individual of this country of their full humanity.”
  - Hosts: W. Kamau Bell & Hari Kondabolu: “Let’s talk about white supremacy... .benefiting from a system of white supremacy....”
- **The doctrine of white supremacy**, a plague (Baldwin, 778): “Some things had happened to me because I was black, and some things had happened to me because I was *me*, and **I had to discover the demarcation line**, if there was one. It seemed to me that such a demarcation line must certainly exist, but it was also **beginning to be borne in on me** that it was certainly not easy to find: and perhaps, indeed, when found, not to be trusted. How to perceive, define, a line nearly too thin for the naked eye, so mercurial, and so mighty.... There was absolutely no way *not* to be black without ceasing to exist. But it frequently seemed that there was no way to *be* black ceasing to exist.... **There was a demarcation line**, to be walked every hour of every day. The demarcation line was **my apprehension of, and, therefore, my responsibility for, my own experience**: the chilling vice versa of what I had made of my experience and what that experience had made of me” (Baldwin, 774-75, 777).

### I. the learning gene:

1. My apprehension of my experience (what it had made of me)
2. & *therefore* my responsibility for my experience (what I had made of my experience)

### II. the learning gene: time, development & “relational subjectivity”

- “It may be impossible for anyone to tell the truth about his past. You drag your past with you everywhere, or it drags you” (Baldwin, “Every Good-Bye,” 773).
- “I knew then that I was a writer, but did not know if I could last long enough to prove it” (Baldwin, 773).
- “The power of the social definition is that **it becomes, fatally, one’s own**—but **it took time**, and much deep water, to make me see this. Rage and misery can be a source of comfort, simply because one has lived with rage and misery for so long” (Baldwin, 775).

### III. the learning gene: learning & unlearning

- “It is a hard way to learn, perhaps, **but there are no easy ways**” (Baldwin, 774).
- “Well, this is, after all, but another way of observing that it is exceedingly difficult for most of us **to discard the assumptions of the society in which we were born**, in which we live, to which we owe our identities; very difficult to defeat the trap of circumstance, which is, also, the web of safety; virtually impossible, if not completely impossible, to envision the future, except in those terms which we think we already know. Most of us are about as eager to be changed as we were to be born, and go through our changes in a similar state of shock” (Baldwin, 775).
- “If I were ever to grow up, ever, then **I had to hear my accent in the accent of others**, and to recognize that anguish was not a province which I had discovered only yesterday, alone” (Baldwin, 776).
- “I suspect, though I certainly cannot prove it, that every life moves full circle—toward revelation: You begin to see, and even rejoice to see, what you always saw. You can even tell anguish to sit down, and shut up, you’re busy right now—and anguish, as you should certainly know by know, ain’t to go nowhere. It might go around the corner, on a particularly bright day, and there *are* those days: but anguish has your number, knows, to paraphrase the song, where you live. It’s a difficult relationship, but mysteriously indispensable. **It teaches you**” (Baldwin, 779).

### IV. “The Learning Gene” & other misinterpretations

- “Scholars have mistakenly used a wholly Newtonian spacetime to interpellate a quantum Baldwin, a misreading that may be limited to (mis)understanding not simply the spacetimes of Baldwin’s travel and written expression but the multidimensionality of his Blackness” (Wright, 109).
  - What is a “Newtonian spacetime” interpretative approach?
    - It invokes a Grand Unified Theory (110) (ie. like “a learning gene”).
    - It imposes an “A to B” chain of causal events (110), in which “origins dominate a linear narrative” (116) (ie. as in “genes” that determine and result in definable outcomes).
  - What is a better way to interpret?
    - We want to foreground the “now”! (116) and we want to find ways to affirm the contingencies of agency.

“For example, I might watch an episode of a television show in one moment and laugh uproariously at what I find to be a daring but insightful joke about racism; in another moment, watching the same show and hearing the same joke, I might well have forgotten my previous reaction (or remember it, in whatever valence) and find myself ambivalent about or offended by the joke. In other words, **I do not move through the world reacting in the same way to the same stimuli all the time**—and perhaps this is because the stimuli are never the same because if not the space than the time has shifted (even if I am watching from my same place on the couch, I am doing so on different days)” (116).

## Podcast Pitch assignment

**Do something risky: imagine the story, before you've even begun to research it.** Dream what it can be, in advance. Ask questions like: "What might work as the beginning, middle and end? How can I be sure to capture conflict, tension and other dramatic elements?" And so move towards your story. "Just be sure to keep your ears open." (Rob Rosenthal)

Our syllabus states: Around halfway through the semester, each group will make a pitch, sharing their ideas, clips and design ideas for their audio-essay with the class. This podcast will be *about* philosophy, but the work of developing and producing it will also be, in essential ways, philosophical. Consider what one of leading writers on radio, Jessica Abel, says about the task of audio-writing: "taking a bunch of unconnected anecdotes—or ideas—or bits of tape—and forming them into an arc is a very complex and difficult job. Even if you've got a focus sentence all worked out, **how do you get from here to there**" (*Out on the Wire*, 112)? The answer to this question is *structure*: finding structure for the tape; discerning the right order that will link recordings together with ideas. And this is what philosophy entails as well: drawing out the structure of sound, critical, rigorous and productive lines of thought.

There are some other key parallels between (good) radio and (good) philosophy: they each provide a reason for a story to exist, a reason that others find compelling; they open up ideas in ways that actually enable listeners/readers to experience, from their own first-person, new ways of understanding something; they *require* the input of others. This latter point is why we will be setting aside time for the podcast pitch: we will need others to help us notice what is most interesting, what is most likely to translate into important experiences for listeners.

Through this project, we will be working to decentre the usual workings of authority in our classroom. Instead of writing to the test (ie. working to submit the essay that a professor seems to want), we will be opening up our process to each other—through the pitch and the subsequent editing. This, too, is essentially philosophical. As Jessica Abel comments, "**Edits are where you find solutions to problems you may not have even known you had**" (*Out on the Wire*, 185). Edits emerge from others' responses to our work. And it's through this immanent, engaged work of creative dialogue that we will discover our key stories, insights and questions.

### Envisioning our audio essays: questions we will ask each group

- Can you begin in the middle?
  - Is there a way to frame your episode so that the drama is front & centre?
- Where do you want to hit pause?
  - is there an idea that needs to be allowed to grow?
  - Can you restate something in another way (adding sounds, adding voices) to dramatize it more clearly?
- What will you use to create contrast? How will you emphasize a moment or an idea?
  - make a montage of clips that all speak to a shared idea: turn the dial *right* or *left* for the clips so that they evoke a 'crowd' of sounds
  - use silence!
  - When there's a key quotation, overlap another voice speaking some of the same words (perhaps replacing a segment of the original media item with the alternate voice)
  - Keep very low audio tunes humming along underneath a key segment

Questions for us as a class, after the pitches:
- Can we begin to discern a broader narrative?
  - What order should these audio essays come in?
  - Can we re-use bits of tape from others' episodes?
  - Are there sources or concepts that we need to explore as a group?

## Incorporating Music

- “Music is the frame around the picture. **It makes it more real than real....** This! I had to learn this by trial and error, but it is so profoundly true: if there is music under a person speaking, and then it stops, whatever is said next is really powerful, it sounds important. It’s like shining a light on it” (Ira Glass in Jessica Abel’s *Out on the Wire*, 34-5).
- “The first thing I do when I’m approaching a score is **separate the scenes**. I don’t set strict time limits on how long or short a piece of music can be played, but I do follow one rule: a new scene needs a new sound. Between each completed thought I insert a few seconds of silence for reference. These gaps offer opportunities for musical changes and punctuation. **By isolating a story’s events and concepts into different musical passages, we give the listener the story’s information in chunks.** Each chunk is packaged within the music; each makes for tasty echoic digestion. If your musical phrasing is clear and calculated, the subject’s thoughts will feel the same. Once I get my chunks spread out, I push and pull, adapting the vocal to fit the musical form, and the form to fit the vocal” (Pat Mesiti-Miller, “Using Music”, 2014)

## Transom.Org, “Using Music: Jonathan Mitchell”

Jonathan Mitchell: “every radio story can be thought of as a piece of music — the talking, the location sounds, even the silences — these are all musical elements.

“When you add music to your story and let it run under a person talking, what you’re really doing is creating a new piece of music. It’s like when a hip-hop artist samples a short bit of music, loops it, adds a beat, and starts rapping. What we’re doing is a lot like that; we’re just working in a different style. Every sound you bring into your story is working together to create not just a story experience, but a musical experience, **and the music you’re making can either serve or undermine the meaning of your story.**

“Sometimes the best musical choice is to not add any music at all; some stories are just better and more effective **when it’s simply a person’s voice and nothing else.** If you want to add music because you think the person talking is boring, you don’t really need to add music — what you need is better material. If you want to add music to mask background noise, what you really need is to make a better recording.

“But if you have a really good reason to add music, one that springs organically out of the story you’re telling, that gives it deeper meaning, resonance, and clarity, it will often become very clear what kind of music you’re looking for. Whenever I have a hard time deciding what music to use or where to put it, usually that means I don’t really understand why I’m putting music there in the first place. But a good reason tells me so much: where it should be placed, what style it should be, what mood it needs to convey. If music really belongs in your story, it won’t be hard to find clues that tell you what kind of music to use.”

Listen to short clip (“Example 3 (mix)”) and see its visual representation

[http://newcdn.transom.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/EXAMPLE-3-mix.mp3?\\_e7](http://newcdn.transom.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/EXAMPLE-3-mix.mp3?_e7)

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- James Baldwin, 1984. “On Being White—and Other Lies,” *Essence*.
- Rob Rosenthal, “Imagining the Story,” *Transom.org* 10.25.11 <http://transom.org/2011/rob-rosenthal-imagining-the-story/>
- Jessica Abel, *Out on the Wire: The Storytelling Secrets of the New Masters of Radio* (Broadway Books, 2015)
- Pat Mesiti-Miller, “Using Music,” *Transom.org* 6.17.14 <http://transom.org/2014/using-music-pat-mesiti-miller/>

Readings for today:

Lynne Huffer, "Foucault's Fossils," *Feminist Philosophies of Life* (85-107);

Stephen Seely, "Does Life Have a Sex?" *Feminist Philosophies of Life* (108-125)

*RadioLab*, "From Tree to Shining Tree"

**Key Words:** • "interesting"  
• "imagining the story"  
• "interpretative framework"

# "Learning"

## as both object & medium for feminist philosophy

*RadioLab*, "From Tree to Shining Tree" (listen to a selection in class, from 8:57 to 11:04). "All these trees were sharing their food underground.... It was like a huge network.... circles, sprouting lines.... Just this incredible communications network that people had no idea about in the past because we didn't know how to look.... You think they're individuals, but no, they're all linked to each other.... The Wood-Wide Web.... This is going places." (start again at 21.11, and listen until 27.04) "... Is there anyone whose job it is to draw little chalk outlines...? They have found salmon in tree rings.... The scale of this is so vast, and we didn't know this until very very recently. You have a forest, you have mushrooms... they're networked... **and they're capable of forestial behaviours that are deeply new, and they're so interesting.**"

### 1. learning as a feedback loop

- Learning that *gives rise* to new possibilities:
  - Erin Manning: "Each thinking in the act must invent its own practices for learning," its own techniques for cultivating philosophy as practice ("a practice that thinks," as Gilles Deleuze puts it)—**the creation of practices "that foreground how learning creates its own value."**
- Structure & relational subjectivity:
  - James Baldwin: "If we are what our circumstances make us, we are, also, what we make of our circumstances."
  - Lisa Guenther: "Biological and social reproduction are not separate processes but rather are **intertwined and mutually implicating**.... We are engaged in social reproduction—in other words, we propagate, modulate, resist, and reject the patterns of others—both in particular moments of biological reproduction and in our everyday lives more generally" (219).
- Interpretative frameworks:
  - Stephanie Jenkins: "Ableism functions as **an interpretative frame** through which marginal others are excluded from the moral community" (Jenkins, 212).
  - Michelle Wright: I do not move through the world reacting in the same way to the same stimuli all the time (116). There's *no* Grand Theory of causal linear connections!
  - Lynne Huffer: "Foucault famously argues in *The Order of Things* that life itself was invented in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. If biology was unknown in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, he writes, 'there was a very simple reason for it: that life itself did not exist. All that existed was living beings'" (96).
  - Stephen Seely: "Trigaray offers a thinking in life, nature, and sexual difference that is not biological or anthropological, and an ontology that is not founded on a nihilistic or neutered metaphysical abstraction but is instead grounded in life as a sexual process of becoming" (111).
  - So what is *our* interpretative framework? And is there an interpretative framework that we want to indict, critique and subvert? (Is there a "learning gene" that you will undermine? And is there an affirmative mode of learning that you are exploring?)

## 2. next week's pitch: "imagining the story"

- Each group will present a pitch to the class. It would be *excellent* to have some audio to share, but it's not necessary if it feels too early in the process. Here's what we'd like to experience from your pitch:
  - **The drama of your episode:** what problem are you exploring? What "philosophy" or "science" are you drawing into this exploration? (**What's your interpretative framework?**) In addition, how will you fill in these ingredients?
    - The episode title
    - "There is no 'Learning Gene', but..."
    - "Today's key word is..."
    - An image for the episode (if you have one already)
  - **The challenge of the first-person:** do you have some ideas of how you are going to animate the tension between the first-person and the structural or systematic issues you're exploring? Are there *even* some reflections on this process that have already become valuable for your episode?
  - **The challenge of the medium:** do you have some ideas about the kinds of recordings & tape you are gathering?
  - **The challenge of the script:** do you have some ideas about where the *middle* of the drama is? And how you might begin in the middle?
  - **The challenge of the task-breakdown:** have you gained some self-awareness about your own interests, predilections and value-commitments? (Has your group already distributed the creative and technical labour? Remember that each audio essay requires research & writing, recording, editing and mixing. If there are musicians in your group, take note!).
    - Writing: HowSound episode, "Writing Out of Tape" <http://transom.org/2015/writing-out-of-tape/> and "How Not to Write for Radio" <http://transom.org/2016/not-write-radio/>
    - Mixing: HowSound Episode, "My Kingdom for some Structure" <http://transom.org/2013/my-kingdom-for-some-structure/>

## 3. REAPER & a little challenge

- Make a 5-second project. See if you can integrate sound with voice recordings.
- DIY REAPER Prezi: skip around through it; maybe watch one of the videos towards the end so that you can *see* editing in progress. Decide where & how you will save your files!

# Learning by Design

## beyond accommodation to universal design

### PHIL 2237 Lesson 7: Beyond Accommodation

Readings for today:

Alison Kafer, "A Future for Whom?" *Feminist Queer Crip*

Ada Jaarsma, "Design Disability Play"

Audio for today:

*HonSound*, "Tinkering with Sound Design"  
*Teaching Strides*, "Teaching Difficult Material"

**Key Words:**

- "accommodation"
- "beyond accommodation"
- "design"

**The import of sound design:** finding another avenue to convey information (Martine Powers, "Tinkering with Sound Design")

The import of material design: "**Design is about shaping the future of the world we live in**" (Tim Ingold, "Designing Environments for Life," *Anthropology & Nature* 2014, 233)

## 1. Design as Editing

- Martine Powers, "Tinkering with Sound Design" (14.50 to 19.26) "I was trying to convey how robotic your brain can be when you move through a traffic intersection... I wanted to make sure it told a cohesive story. I basically wrote the whole script out the way that I thought it should sound... and I took words out of it that I could hand off to other people... a roundabout doesn't take more than 3 seconds... I got people to just sit in the car and imagine what it's like.... I had them sitting in the driver's seat... and describe slowly what that feeling is like...in the same tense... in the moment, right now..."
  - Powers' *specific design choices*: a robot spoke some of the words; music and a clip of a walk signal; an echo of the word "wait"; incorporating others' voices; voices that echo each other; first-person reflections about driving

## 2. Exclusionary & Exceptionalist Design

- "A Foundation for a Better Life" (*Pass it On* billboards, public service announcements, a prescribed set of values. For example, see slogans: "Me quit? Never" "From Homeless to Harvard").
  - Kafer asks: "**What work does disability do** in this campaign, and what are the assumptions on which these signs rely?" (95)
- There are *design choices* behind such billboards:
  - Disabled exemplars are carefully chosen, used "to push other disabled bodies aside, beyond the margins of these texts." "We're admitted only insofar as we promise **not to complain but only to inspire**" (93).
  - "Commentators must choose from a select list of values in making their recommendations: 'perseverance' is an acceptable virtue, for example, **while 'resistance' is not**; values-based communities apparently have room for 'volunteering' **but not 'activism'**" (Kafer 92).
  - Individuals with disabilities "appear in these billboards to inspire—and contain—the nondisabled, who are the target audience for these spots" and who are invited to realize that "things could be much worse, a 'much worse' best illustrated by the disabled body" (93).
  - The billboards are located far above ground level, "so that passersby literally have to look up at the pictures of the virtuous people towering over them. The difference in scale mimics the difference in scale nondisabled viewers trace between themselves and the disabled people in the billboards: "Their problems are huge—paralysis, blindness, amputation—and mine are small because I'm not disabled" (93).
- "**Within this individualist framework** [of the *Pass it On* billboard campaign], disability is presented as **something to be overcome through personal achievement and dedication**.... There are no billboards touting solidarity, or social change, or community development; none of the images celebrate disparate groups coming together to engage in coalition work. There is no recognition of ableism or discrimination or oppression in these materials, only an insistence that individuals take responsibility for

their own successes and failures. As a result, disability is depoliticized, presented as a fact of life requiring determination and courage, **not as a system marking some bodies, ways of thinking, and patterns of movement as deviant and unworthy**” (89).

- Disability prompts “accommodations”, rather than much more universal approaches to inclusion and accessibility. What is a universal approach to design? **What do we mean by “universal”?**
  - What we *don't* mean is unity: “[In the billboard campaign], ‘community’ rests on the notion that people can come together in consensus and unity, putting aside their differences in order to create a unified whole grounded in common experience and common values. This presumption of unity, however, **excludes difference and dissent**, thereby creating a self-perpetuating homogeneity. Attempts to determine in advance how to adjudicate community values runs the risk of **solidifying existing understandings** of community, thereby making it much more difficult to shift or expand definitions of ‘community’ in the future. Current understandings of such concepts then become the standard against which to measure future articulations, **potentially keeping in place barriers to access that are not as yet recognized as such**” (98).

How do these questions bear upon classrooms? How might universities and classrooms move “beyond accommodation” to universal design?

- Universities tend to “accommodate” rather than achieve universal design: they retrofit existing features and assume that “individual disabled people should negotiate these barriers within the new normative matter of flexible classroom space for an unexamined student-type” (Tanya Titchkosky, cited Jaarsma 201).
- We need creativity, openness, & a much more radical relationship to design: “it is not enough to simply insert new billboards in the place of old ones” (Kafer 102). Design cannot be based upon normative templates. There is no “typical user”! Design needs anticipation, not the application of pre-set templates. And for that to work, we need effective feedback loops.
- “Learning is ‘occasioned’ rather than ‘caused,’ ‘non-linear’ and ‘complex’ rather than automatic or prescribed. Design... often exceeds the intentions of its architects. And student ‘users’ themselves are non-conforming in all kinds of inventive ways” (Jaarsma 207).
- Can classrooms become sites of play, rather than “infectious conformal germs” (Brian Massumi, cited Jaarsma 202)?

### 3. The Principles of Universal Design

Equitable Use	The design is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities
Flexibility in Use	The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities
Simple and Intuitive Use	Use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user’s experience, knowledge, language skills or current concentration level
Perceptible Information	The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user’s sensor abilities
Tolerance for Error	The design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions
Low Physical Effort	The design can be used efficiently and comfortably and with a minimum of fatigue
Size and Space for Approach and Use	Appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation, and use regardless of the body’s size, posture, or mobility

(North Carolina State University, Center for Universal Design, 1997)

## *The Principles of Universal Design for Learning*

Instructional materials and activities should:

Be accessible and fair.	Speak loudly, clearly, and at a pace suitable to the group and material; make eye contact with individuals or throughout all parts of the room.
Be straightforward and consistent.	Lecture topics should be consistent with the course outline.
Provide flexibility in use, participation and presentation.	Use visual aids or on-line alternatives to lectures.
be explicitly presented and readily perceived.	Define technical terms the first time they're used, avoiding lingo or acronyms; clearly identify major topics so that students can understand the relative importance and the relationship of topics.
Provide a supportive learning environment.	Provide a teaching philosophy; encourage; seek ways to be as inclusive as possible.
Minimize unnecessary physical effort or requirements.	Improve the material conditions of the classroom; accommodate all accessibility needs.
Ensure a learning space that accommodates both students and instructional methods.	Employ a variety of methods to facilitate participation and effective learning.

(Lecture Guide using Principles of Universal Instructional Design, University of Guelph)

# trans literatures

## perspective & the promise of creative writing

### PHIL 2237 lesson 8: trans studies & feminist philosophy

Readings for today:

Casey Plett, short stories from *A Safe Girl to Love* (“How to stay friends”; “Lizzy & Annie”; “Real equality (a manifesto)”)

Katherine Cross, “The literary renaissance of trans women writers”

Casey Plett, “Balls Out: A Column on Being Transgendered—Column 19 Voices”

*Audio essay*: Woodland Secrets, “Casey Plett”

**Key Words:** • “non-didactic”  
• “ritual”

“... a distinguishing feature of this new wave of trans women’s lit: **It is not mean to be didactic for the cisgender reader.** At least, not in the traditional sense that is implied by imperious questions from speakers who wish to be ‘educated,’ often at the expense of one’s dignity (“Have you had the surgery?’, ‘How do you have sex?’, etc.)” – Katherine Cross

## 1. perspective

- Katherine Cross: “So much discourse around trans women’s existence has been spun **by everyone but us**: cisgender male psychologists, cis feminist academics, trans men and queer cis people. All have had their say about our lives **and what they supposedly signify to them**: protean radicalism, a crypto-conservative conspiracy, a tangle of pathology. But it is very rare that trans women themselves are heard when we speak about who we are and what we mean.”
- ... “what sets *Nevada* apart is that its lessons were of the kind that seduce you along long bridges into the mist. **They are hard lessons**: a look at the everyday, common nonsenses of trans women’s existence, what sex is really like, what work is like, what living on a shoestring at the margins means amid mounting healthcare costs, what the relationships between gender-nonconforming people evince about the troubled psyches we must nurse under patriarchy, and what it can mean to be ‘fucked up’. What [Imogen] Binnie’s novel gives us... is a portrait of the trans woman as human. Not inspiration porn, not a feel-good story of triumph over lone bigots, not lurid medical examinations, but a decidedly human story. For all the differences we have with cisgender people, **we share the bonds of humanity that ought to make such stories intelligible**, and thankfully many cis people have walked away with a better understanding of who we are from this new bounty of poetry and prose.”
- C. Jacob Hale: “Interrogate your own subject position. . . . what your interests and stakes are in forming your initial interest, and what your interests and stakes are in what you see and say as you continue your work. . . . Focus on: What does looking at transsexuals, transsexuality, transsexualism, or transsexual\_\_\_ tell you about *yourself*, *not* what does it tell you about trans” (n.d.)
- --- “When we read other’s similarities to ourselves as conclusive evidence that they occupy the same categories that we do, assuming that there are no relevant differences between ourselves and them, **we construct ourselves as gods** creating others in our own image without regard to their conceptual frameworks and choices within those frameworks” (1998, 326)
- Casey Plett:
  - “Voice” (Balls Out: A Column on Being Transgendered)
  - “How to Stay Friends”
  - “Lizzy & Annie”
  - “Real Equality (A Manifesto)”
  - Podcast interview, Woodland Secrets

## 2. trans studies & feminist philosophy

- Jacob Hale: “I remain firmly agnostic about sex/gender distinctions.... I assume that there is nothing necessary, nor natural, about any culture’s gender concepts.... **Gender should be consensual and [gender proliferation is a promising strategy]**” (“Are Lesbians Women?”)
- Riki Ann Wilchins: “I have begun speaking simply of gender as a name for that system that punishes bodies for how they look, who they love, or how they feel—for the size or color or shape of their skin” (1997, 17).

- Talia Bettcher: Gender presentation can be understood “not only as a technology of the body, but as a **technology of intimate personhood**. That is, it can be used as a way to redraw one’s interpersonal boundaries. Indeed, it is possible to undermine the very capacity of gender presentation to communicate genital status at all” (“Full Frontal Morality”)
  - In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association dropped the pathologizing diagnosis of homosexuality from the DSM-III. That same DSM-III, published in 1980, introduced a new pathology: Gender Identity Disorder of Childhood. This diagnosis was highly differential between boys and girls: gender was *asymmetrical*. A girl would get this label only in the rare case of asserting that she is anatomically ‘male’ (ie. That she has, or will grow, a penis). A boy could be treated for Gender Identity Disorder if he merely asserted “that it would be better not to have a penis” or if he displays a “preoccupation with female stereotypical activities as manifested by a preference for either cross-dressing or simulating female attire, or by a compelling desire to participate in the games and pastimes of girls.”
  - In its recent update, the DSM-V replaces “Gender Identity Disorder” with “Gender Dysphoria” (replacing “identity” with the distress that results from the tension between sociocultural scripts and personal experience). Bodily dysphoria, on these terms, can mark the unwanted and uncomfortable force of socially conferred interpersonal boundaries—and a desire to renegotiate them (Talia Bettcher).

### 3. the promise of creative writing

- Read out loud together, taking turns, CAConrad’s poem “Poetry and Ritual.”
- Are there rituals that creative writing makes possible? Is there critical, even radical, potential in rituals, especially for transforming our somatic, bodily life?

#### References

- Bettcher, Talia Mae. “Full Frontal Morality: The Naked Truth about Gender,” *Hypatia* 2012 27(2): 319-337.
- Conrad, CA. 2015. “Poetry & Ritual”
- Hale, C. Jacob. n.d. “Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans\_\_\_\_\_.” <http://www.sandystone.com/hale.rules.html>
- “Are Lesbians Women?” *Hypatia* 1996 11(2) 94-121.
- Wilchins, Riki Anne. 1997. *Read My Lips: Sexual Subversion and the End of Gender*. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books.

Readings for today:

Astra Taylor, "Unschooling," *Utne* 2013

Nancy Fraser interview, "The Politics of Framing," Kate Nash & Vikki Bell, *Theory, Culture & Society* 2007 24(4): 73-86

Audio essay: "Eggshells," *Colour Code*

**Key Words:** • "neo-liberalism"

- "unlearning"
- "bad science"

# finding one's voice

## ethos & conversations

"... the theories and practice of radical pedagogy..." (Astra Taylor) ....  
the difficulty of sustaining "a productive relation between theory and practice..." (Nancy Fraser)

"Are schools social levelers, or do they reinforce the class pyramid by tracking and sorting children from a young age? Presumably they do both...."

"I would have loved to commune with other young people and find out what a school of freedom could look like. But for some reason, such a possibility was unthinkable, a wild fantasy.... If nothing else, we should pause to wonder why there's so rarely any middle ground." (Astra Taylor)

Critical theory: "public spheres fulfill their emancipatory, democratizing function when the public opinion formed within them is both **legitimate and efficacious** (Nancy Fraser, 83)

## 1. unschooling

- Astra Taylor: "We always said **the world was our classroom**. In theory at least, nothing was off-limits.... My parents eschewed coercion and counted on our curiosity, which they understood to be a **most basic human capacity**. This is really what the whole debate over compulsory schooling is about. **Do we trust people's capacities to be curious or not?** This is really what the whole debate over...."
- "We set our own standards of excellence, which were often impossible to meet. Yet failure in intellectual and creative pursuits felt honourable as opposed to humiliating. Adults never lorded **their possession of right answers** over us, or shamed us when we lacked certain skills, or ranked us against one another. It shocks me to this day that we live in a world where **this basic courtesy** is rare and precious" ("Unschooling," 45).
- "Boredom: that's the big one. It's boredom we were released from.... But school also inculcates boredom as an attitude, a habit, **a way of being in the world**, as all they're really entitled to feel. It's an ethos, one that lingers in adult life.... Schools are factories of ennui, restlessness, lethargy, monotony, tedium.... For us, boredom was something to be passed through: it was a pit stop along the road to becoming engaged.... Unschooling is a lifelong commitment, **an ethos**—kind of the way boredom can be, though it's boredom's opposite" (46-7)

## 2. critical theory & solidarity

- Nancy Fraser: "I have always conceived **injustice** in terms of institutionalized obstacles to parity of participation in social life" (76).
  - Fraser's critical theory: representation; redistribution; recognition. "When political space is unjustly framed, **the result is the denial of political voice to those who are cast outside** the universe of those who 'count'" (77).
  - The common enemy: "those who occupy the commanding heights of neoliberal globalizing capitalism" (81).
- "Not content simply to treat problems **in the form in which they are given** within the established frame, we make the frame itself the focus of attention and political reconstruction. The result is a form of meta-politics, in which the exclusions of ordinary political practice are exposed and contested" (82).

### 3. “Eggshells” (Colour Code by Denise Balkasoon & Hannah Sung)

From the episode’s show notes: “What does white fragility mean to you?” (*The Seattle Times*)

- Robin DiAngelo: white fragility is “the inability to handle challenges to the white position, worldview or perspective.... of ourselves as the norm for humanity.... When it does challenge, it throws us off balance, and we don’t have the skills or the stamina...”

*the set up:* a CBC/Angus Reid Institute poll (Oct 2016): 68% of Canadians want minorities to do more to “fit in” (contrasting with 53% of Americans)

*the debrief between Denise & Hannah:* “the sound of a conversation that all racialized people have nightmares about”

*the convo itself:* a radio conversation between Denise Balkasoon & Ian Power (on Vancouver’s CKNW)

Ian: “Minorities that tend to stick to themselves—insular--- I want to know more about your community, this community.... And I find that I’m not allowed in.... and yet, I want to.... i want to be able to go into these cultures, these minorities, and be part of their culture and have them be part of what I call my culture: the Canadian culture. Am I off? Am I expecting too much? Am I asking the wrong question?”

Denise: “I think most groups of people do that, including white Canadians.... Was there a time when you were turned away? This might just be your perception.”

Ian: “Actually, I have been turned away. Not at the door, per se, but when I am out in the community and there are identifiable groups that are not interested in conversing in the line up at the grocery store... when I go to the community centre, which I do every day, by the way... most are pretty good, but there are some that don’t want anything to do with the broader community. They stay within their own culture.... I think that what Canadians want is more assimilation.”

Denise: “Those Canadians are also Canadians..... if one person doesn’t want to talk to you at the grocery store, maybe they’re having a bad day...”

Ian: “I think you’re misunderstanding what I’m saying. I’m not suggesting that one incident .... What I’m saying is that I live in a community where I am, as a Caucasian male, a minority. And sometimes I don’t feel that comfortable. But I’m not recognized as a minority..... I live this everyday. So I know what it’s like to be on that side of things.... I know they’re immigrants because they’re very fluent in their mother tongue.... I guess I’m just a racist now.... I plead complete guilt...”

Denise: “There’s a concept called white fragility which is that when white people have to deal with race... they get uncomfortable.”

Ian: “And so what? What does that mean? Does that mean because the colour of my skin doesn’t match yours... maybe I’m from far away.... You really know how to trivialize things, don’t you? ... every person is an individual, let’s agree on that. I’m talking about groups of people who are considered to be minorities.... I’m the minority where I live, but I’m not recognized.... I want them to participate in the politics of the community.”

*the post-convo apologies:*

- Larry Gifford, the program director of the station, calls to apologize; he had received “feedback” from Denise’s twitter followers.
  - Denise: “these sentiments weren’t shocking to me.... It’s really hard to talk about race. That’s part of the whole point of our podcast.”
- Ian called to apologize himself. But many people tweet support for Ian and antagonism towards Denise. Ian gets fired, as does the producer of the segment.
  - Denise & Hannah: “What is the point of getting into it with that person? what is the point of getting into it with someone like that? what is the point?... can they unlearn what they think they know? .... I guess the point of interacting with them is making them a better person.”

What are the key objectives of this podcast, do you think? Is it an example of critical theory? How??

# Group Podcast Project assignment

"The number one thing about learning is to do: you have to do, you have to make.  
**You have to do the thing.**" – Jessica Abel (2016).

"I think all good story telling and all good writing, if you tell the truth about your experience, it becomes universal.... The tape kind of talks to each other in ways that I didn't expect.... All of a sudden, we're talking to each other in different tracks—some of it is intentional and some of it just kinda happened"—Marlo, creator of "How to be a Girl" podcast (interview with Rob Rosenthal, "A mom, a transgender daughter & a podcast," *HowSound* podcast)

## shared audio equipment

- REAPER is the software we're using (download at [Reaper.fm](http://Reaper.fm)).
- Start experimenting with very basic audio-editing! (Recording; deleting sections of tape; mixing sounds with vocals). Make sure to take notes about your recording! (where you are, the ambient sounds). And make double-sure to save your file and even duplicate it before you start editing it. Tips for recording: always **record as WAV files** (not mp3) to preserve sound quality. **Record at 16-bit, 44.1 kHz.** Tips about sharing equipment: instead of removing the soundcard, use the USB connector to upload your audio files (and remove your files before you give the recorder to someone else).
- Start looking for open access/ royalty-free sounds to incorporate! (Make a sound database for yourself or for your group).
- Remember that you'll need to save all audio files that you might or will incorporate into your audio essay in a *shared folder that everyone in your group has access to*. Here are sites for finding music and usable sounds:
  - <https://search.creativecommons.org>
  - <http://freemusicarchive.org/>
  - <http://opsound.org/>
  - <http://www.freesound.org/>
  - <http://www.soundsnap.com/>
  - <http://incompetech.com/music/>

## skills & learning objectives

- Here are the kinds of skills that we'll be practicing and developing through this podcast project:
  - what interests us? are there moments, interactions, texts, conversations or even gestures that *resonate* with interest (and the promise of even more interest)? Let's pay attention to our attention *as the starting point* of our audio projects.
  - how should we articulate this "interest" in order to interest others? (are there specific questions we can pose, particular lines of inquiry we can trace, or other kinds of actions that hold real promise?)
  - what structure is best for the narrative arc of my very-interesting problem or set of ideas? (there are lots of structures that audio-writers use to craft evocative, effective audio pieces: <http://transom.org/2013/my-kingdom-for-some-structure/>) Can we begin our audio essays in the middle?!?
  - what background knowledge do I need to know? what could I leave out, what should I definitely include or even expand upon in order to create a conceptually rigorous, affectively engaging piece?
  - are there even more creative ways for me to convey my interesting information, once I know quite a bit about it? can I move the pieces around, find new, weird, dissonant or enlightening connections, and open up space to delve deeper? is there a frame that will help the moving pieces to *pop* with meaning?
  - We are going to place enormous value in editing! Here's a brilliantly phrased explication of what we'll reach for: through creative work, "I came to believe in duration. **How a narrative becomes itself in time.** How cycles of dormancy and expression are weirdly nutritive. How **failure itself becomes a site of possibility**: an aperture for chance; for the conditions of the work to arrive in a different time to the one in which it was begun. I learned to continue, to keep moving forward, to keep writing, whether the outcome of that writing was visible – perceptible – or not. I **learned how to re-write my work** with as much passion and joy and curiosity as I had given to the writing of it. I even invented a chant: Re-writing is writing. Writing is re-writing." (Bhanu Kapil)

## our process

- Here's a sketch of the timeline for our podcast project:
  1. Make our groups (3 groups of ten), organized around a shared theme or a shared vision of process
  2. Each episode will need 2 elements: a keyword (something technical, like a philosophical concept) and a way to complete the sentence "Of course there is no learning gene, but...".
  3. Decide on the shared macro structure of the podcast (our overarching narrative) and the micro structure of each individual episode (sub-divided into even smaller segments). Each group will make a *pitch* to the class, laying out a range of possible structures & emphases for their episode.
  4. Concentrate on the development of the podcast episode, taking care to integrate the formal macro structure we've agreed upon and the specific focus chosen by the episode-group. Assign tasks to each person in the group, taking care to let everyone follow their own interests, skills & ambitions. Meet with Mary to talk through the process.
    - 1. researching, writing, developing interview questions; transcribing the episode with "show notes" for the podcast website
      - see podcast episodes: "How Not to Write for Radio" (HowSound Aug 2016); "Writing Out of Tape" (Howsound Oct 2015)
    - 2. recording, editing, and mixing the podcast episode
      - see podcast episodes: "Kingdom for some Structure" (HowSound March 2013)
  5. Assess the final created product, testing out the idea that research into an object *changes* the "ontological status" of that object: are there first-person reflections that actually should be added in to your audio essay? You'll share your audio essay with the class in the last week of classes. And your individual reflection on the podcast (the process of creating it, as well as the final creation itself) is due in exam week.

## episode themes

- Our podcast project is called "The Learning Gene," and each episode will begin something like: *You're listening to 'The Learning Gene' podcast, rarely told stories about the dramas of the classroom. Of course, there is no 'learning gene' but...* and each episode will complete that statement in a different way. For example, the first episode will go something like "... but epigenetics teaches us that our genes are always learning." And the second will go something like "... but professors don't know that." We'll be compiling a list of other possibilities, and each group will pick one as the framing for their episode.
- Remember that we want to explore "the learning gene" (the embodied processes of learning that are both biological and social) from the *subjective* as well as the *academic*. The creative challenge will be discerning where and how to anchor your narratives in the first-person.
- Here are potential themes for podcast episodes:
  - Unlearning as a personal & collective endeavour
  - Epigenetics & the challenge to determinist approaches to "learning"
  - Critical race theory & "race" in the classroom
  - Crippling the classroom
  - Trans studies & the question of "sex"
  - Neo-liberalism in the classroom

## References

Jessica Abel, *Tape* podcast episode 30, March 1 2016 <https://www.podcastchart.com/podcasts/tape/episodes/30-jessica-abel>

Bhanu Kapil, "Goddard College MFAW Commencement Speech," 2016 <http://thewriterintheworld.com/bhanu-kapils-goddard-college-mfaw-commencement-speech/>

Rob Rosenthal, "A mom, a transgender daughter & a podcast," *HowSound* podcast, June 30 2015 <http://transom.org/2015/a-mom-a-transgender-daughter-and-a-podcast/>

# Podcast Project assignment

## ‘The Learning Gene’: the philosophy, science & drama of the classroom

“The number one thing about learning is to do: you have to do, you have to make.  
**You have to do the thing.**” – Jessica Abel (2016).

### Audio Essay deadlines & requirements (drafts due in our last class; final deadline negotiable)

Here are the elements that each group should submit:

**Title & keyword:** provide a title for your episode, along with the keyword and a conclusion to the phrase “Of course, there is no ‘learning gene,’ but...”

**Attributions:** every student can decide how you’d like to be represented on the podcast episode page. Be sure to be as specific as you’d like, and of course you can also choose to be anonymous if you’d like. Options include: your name; a hyperlink to your website if any; a photo if you’d like (full-colour photo, with the dimensions of 300 x 400 pixels, 72 dpi); a short bio. Just to reiterate: this is all entirely optional. Part of this project involves thinking about sharing our voices as part of an open access resource. And so part of the challenge is for you to discern the quality and parameters of your voice, in this context.

**Image:** provide an image for your episode. You can use one of your photographs, or you can search the creative commons for images. The image should be in full-colour, 1000 x 1000 pixels, 72 dpi.

**Student Permissions:** fill out the “learning gene” permissions form and sign it.

**Interview Permissions:** if your audio essay includes any interviews, you’ll need to submit a signed permission form from each interviewee.

**Transcript:** it’s very important, for accessibility reasons, that our audio essays are available in transcript-form, and so each group will need to submit a transcript of their complete episode.

**Show Notes:** **1.** are there citations or references to share? **2.** And did you use sound effects or soundtracks or songs that need to be publicly acknowledged? **3.** In addition, are there any suggested readings or links you’d like to include in the show notes? This is the place where our audio essays truly become “open educational resources”; be sure to think about how you envision others engaging with your work for educational (including unlearning) purposes. *There should be a minimum of two or three references for your audio essay’s show notes;* think about research that you conducted or texts that you read as crucial background reading, and provide citation information. **4.** Are there specific thank you attributions that you’d like to include in the show notes (individuals you’d like to recognize publicly)?

**Individual Website Reflections (optional):** are there reflections you are willing to share on the podcast’s official website about the process of producing your audio essay? This is also a place where our audio essays become vibrant sites of conversation and learning/unlearning! Consider submitting a sentence or two that captures your own perspective on the process itself or on the finished product. Or submitting a sentence or two about how you hope this audio essay might prompt

certain conversations, questions or new creative projects. (You can submit something and have it on the website anonymously or with your name on it).

### **Self-reflection & critique (6 pages, double-spaced, due during exam week)**

A crucial part of the podcast project involves *finding your voice*: first, discerning which role to play (interviewing; writing; researching; editing & mixing; sound design) and then of course inhabiting this role in order to collaboratively create an audio essay.

This self-reflection & critique is your opportunity to reflect carefully on this process. Here are some details that you should be sure to include: **the theme of your audio essay and your own assessment of that theme** (are you satisfied with it? Do you continue to think it's a significant theme, worthy of this kind of open creative discussion?); **the experience of working in a group** (you are welcome to reflect directly on the group process; creative work is much more challenging when it's undertaken collaboratively, and this should be part of what you're reflecting on); **broader conceptual reflections** on the significance of the project.

- Here are some options for how to approach this 6-page self-reflection:

1. **Choose one of the keywords** of our course and use it as the frame for your self-reflection. How did your own experience of learning-via-making *open up* the meaning and significance of this keyword? In order to expand your reflection, look at the hope-- **demonstrated by at least one of the thinkers we read this semester** – that is placed in learning/unlearning *through* making. Reflecting specifically on your own experiences, do you share the hope of this thinker? How so or why not? Imagine your audio essay out in the world for educators and students to engage and listen to: how does this open educational resource, that you helped create, resonate with the keyword that you've chosen as the frame for your reflection? Put differently, **is there a feedback loop** between your own audio creation (and the process of creating it) and your understanding of the keyword?
2. A key theme of our course is the tension between *relational subjectivity* (the first-person perspective) and *structures/systems of oppression*. **Reflect on the role that your own first-person perspective played** in the process of developing and producing the audio essay, and point to **one concrete example** of how you put your own perspective into play in a way that identified or rendered recognizable a systemic or structural dimension of injustice. Be as specific as you can in describing and assessing the “first person” dimensions of your work on this project: did your own perspective shift at all? Did you employ your first-person voice as a part of the craft of audio? what role do you think that first-person voices can or should play in confronting systemic forms of injustice? **Using the work of one of the thinkers that we read this semester**, explain the extent to which you are willing to place real hope in relational subjectivity as a resource for combating oppression and securing the possibility of social change.
3. Our podcast is called “the learning gene,” and it has a twofold objective: to call out and undermine ideologies about “learning genes” and soliciting more open-ended, engaged and critical approaches to learning (and unlearning). **How does your audio essay achieve these two goals?** If we characterize your own audio essay as an example of “teaching” or “critical theory” or “public discourse” or “unlearning,” what hope would you lay out for its capacity to make a difference in how people understand or engage with learning? **Choose one of the thinkers** we studied this term to expand upon your reflections, a thinker whose own indictment of oppression and/or use of the first-person resonates with your own account of why “there is no ‘learning gene.’”