

Cultures of Denunciation

Defamation, Ostracism, and Exclusion in North American Literature



Room and time: SR 34.D2 (Attemsgasse 25, Top Floor),
Wednesday, 11:45-13:15

Course number: ENP.01024UB

Lecturer: Univ.-Prof. Dr. Stefan Brandt

Office hours: Thur, 4-6 p.m. (digital office hours) · **Email:** stefan.brandt@uni-graz.at

Course tutor Alexandra Pasca (alexandra.pasca@uni-graz.at)

Description: The term ‘cancel culture’ has become a battle cry in recent debates surrounding censorship and free speech, describing the public condemnation of perceived misdemeanors (usually offensive or objectionable utterances). Although charged with much political and affective baggage, the concept of ‘cancel culture’ can be instrumental in investigating a number of key questions in modern-day society: How shall a hegemonic culture deal with individual acts that seem to defy the limits of socially accepted behavior? Which function does *denunciation* – according to Cambridge Dictionary “the act of accusing someone in public of something bad” – assume in the negotiation of controversial standpoints and the oftentimes ensuing boycott of inconvenient positions? From a sociological angle, practices of denunciation have the potential to disrupt, energize, and stabilize the social order, implementing a highly dynamic relationship between individual and society. Designed to execute effective censorship, “spectacles of public denunciations” (J. Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 129) are haunted by the desire to purify society and resist contamination. While often situated in the realm of social media in contemporary society, earlier forms of condemnation culture have significantly shaped social and public life, with the banishment of Ann Hutchinson from the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the Puritan Era being a particularly notorious case.

This course focuses on the literary and cultural roots of public sanctioning – and resistance to it – from the colonial age to postmodernity. Which role have American literature and culture played in the negotiation of deviating behavior and its denunciation of social performances? How have literary and cultural texts addressed themes such as public indictment, demonization, and exclusion? And which strategies of creative resistance to social conformity are outlined in these texts? Examples of North American narratives that tackle questions of defamation, ostracism, and social isolation include the following: Washington Irving’s “The Little Man in Black” (1807), Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), P. L. Dunbar’s “The Lynching of Jube Benson” (1902), Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery” (1948), Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* (1953), Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), and Jay Asher’s *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007).

Teaching and Learning Method: This is an interactive course. Participation in group discussions as well as contributions to the discussion forums on the Moodle course site will be part of the final grade. Students will organize *expert sessions* for each meeting, using questions, games, illustrations, video clips, and group work as didactic tools.

Materials: All relevant texts will be made available in excerpts on Moodle. Be prepared to purchase a few books for further investigation.

ASSESSMENT:

A.) Regular attendance (no more than 2 absences!), **active participation**, and at least seven substantiated entries in the **Moodle discussion forum (1/3)**;

B.) Expert Session, Handout, and Revised Presentation (to be held in class and then uploaded onto the Moodle course site) **(1/3)**;

C.) 2-page research proposal plus **12-15-page final paper** (5,000 – 6,000 words, including title page, table of contents, and bibliography). Please use templates on Moodle! **(1/3)**.

Note: You need to pass each section to pass the whole course.

A.) REGULAR ATTENDANCE, CLASS, PARTICIPATION, AND MOODLE DISCUSSION FORUM

Regular attendance and **active participation** in class sessions are crucial to the success of the course. **Absences** must be explained in writing, preferably prior to class. No more than two absences are allowed. You are expected to be present in our meetings, not only having read the assigned material, but also prepared to fully engage with the material, ask questions, offer perceptive interpretations, and even argue for your way of reading the text at hand. Note: There might be **pop quizzes** (i.e., unannounced tests at the beginning of a session) to check whether you have read the materials.

You need to **post at least seven substantial entries** in the **Moodle discussion forum**. Make sure you are well informed *before* answering the three discussion questions: Read the required text. Conduct some **additional online research** according to your own research interests. When making an entry, refer to useful materials you found on the internet (clips, articles, etc.). Ideally, you would also **respond to other entries** already uploaded by other students.

B.) EXPERT SESSION, REVISED PRESENTATION, AND HANDOUT

As an expert, you will prepare **three short questions** for the discussion forum, focusing on composition, background, and effect in the main text (to be uploaded 6 days in advance), potentially together with links to **clips** or **images**. Show your discussion questions to me 1 week before your session (or send them to me via email)!

In class, you can start with some **essential information** on the topic (look at the keywords on the syllabus first), then pose questions to trigger a **lively discussion**. Choose **examples** related to the topic of the session that you can discuss in class (for example, in group work). Be **interactive**. Show images and clips, launch a game, pick up questions. Do not stick to your schedule *too much*!

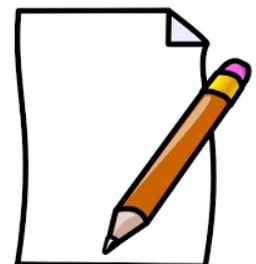
Revise your presentation carefully after the session and **upload it** together with a **handout** (3 pages) on Moodle **within one week after the session**!

C.) RESEARCH PROPOSAL AND FINAL PAPER

A **research proposal** (2 pages) is due around mid-term. Look for the exact dates in the course agenda below. The form for the research proposal is available on Moodle.

The **final paper** (max. 15 pages, including title page, table of contents, and bibliography, 5,000 – 6,000 words) should be typed (12 pt Times New Roman, using one side of the sheet only, pages numbered). The paper should show your name, your student email address, the course title, the instructor's name, the date of submission, and the number of words. Primary and secondary sources need to be cited according to the Uni Graz guidelines for style and format.

The **deadline** for submission of the final paper is **Friday, February 11, 2022**. Keep in mind: A good paper is a finished paper. There is **no extension** of this deadline.



SYLLABUS

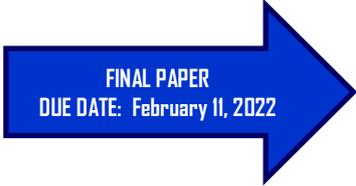
- 20 Oct. Cultures of Denunciation in America – An Overview**
Basic texts:
Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (1982).¹
Erving Goffman, from *Stigma* (1963).
Keywords: Defamation; Denunciation; Exclusion; Peer-Group Pressure; Stigma.
- 27 Oct. Witch-Hunts, Persecutions, Religious Fundamentalism**
Main text (reading required):
Cotton Mather, “A Modern Instance of Witches” (1693).
Additional text (optional):
Maryse Condé, excerpts from *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (1986/1992).
Keywords: Pillory; Salem Witchcraft Trials; Superstition; Witch-Hunts.
- 3 Nov. Outcasts, Underdogs, and Nonconformists**
Main text (reading required):
Washington Irving, “The Little Man in Black” (1807).
Additional text (optional):
Stephen Crane, “The Monster” or “The Blue Hotel” (1898).
Keywords: Isolation; Ostracism; Outcasts.
- 10 Nov. Hypocrisy, Social Exclusion, and Punishment**
Main text (reading required):
Nathaniel Hawthorne, ch. 1-5 & ch. 22-24
from *The Scarlet Letter* (1850).
Additional text (optional):
T. Perrotta & R. Milder, “Preface” and “Introduction” to *The Scarlet Letter* (2016).
Keywords: Hypocrisy; Punishment; Puritanism; Sin.
- 17 Nov. Systemic Racism, Lynching, and Racial Terror**
Main text (reading required):
Paul Laurence Dunbar, “The Lynching of Jube Benson” (1902).
Additional text (optional):
Zitkala-Sa, “The School Days of an Indian Girl” (1900).
Keywords: Lynching; Racial Terror; Segregation; Systemic Racism.
- 24 Nov. Independent Study Unit- Research Proposal**
No class! Create a 2-page research proposal for your final paper.
- 1 Dec. The Psychology of Denunciation – Kafka’s *The Trial* as a Key Case**
Main text (reading required):
Franz Kafka, ch. 1-2 & ch. 9-10 from *The Trial* (1925).
Additional text (optional):
The Trial (dir. Orson Welles, 1962). [Check out at the Media Archive, Heinrichstr. 18/I].
Keywords: Calumny; Inner Self; Judgment; Slander.
- 15 Dec. Group Rituals, the Vulnerability of the Individual, and Censoring**
Main text (reading required):
Shirley Jackson, “The Lottery” (1948).
Additional text (optional):
Bill Brown et al., “The Censoring of ‘The Lottery’” (1986).
Keywords: Censoring; Group Pressure; Rituality; Tradition; Tribes Effect; Victim; Violence; Vulnerability.



DUE DATE
RESEARCH PROPOSAL

¹ All print texts are available on Moodle.

- 12 Jan. McCarthyism, the Red Scare, and Political Forms of Terror**
Main text (reading required):
 James Wechsler, "To Be Called Before the McCarthy Committee" (1973).
Additional text (optional):
 Arthur Miller, excerpts from *The Crucible* (1953).
Keywords: Anti-Communism; Modern Witch-Hunts; Political Terror; Red Scare; Smear Campaigns.
- 19 Jan. Misogyny, Dystopia, and State Persecution**
Main text (reading required):
 Margaret Atwood, selected chapters from *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985).
Additional text (optional):
 Philip Roth, excerpts from *The Plot Against America* (2004).
Keywords: Dystopia; SF; Speculative Fiction; Systemic Denunciation; Totalitarianism.
- 26 Jan. Bullying, Ostracism, Suicide**
Main text (reading required):
 Jay Asher, selected chapters from *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007).
Additional text (optional):
 Becci Albertalli, excerpts from *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2015).
Keywords: Bullying; (Cyber) Mobbing; High Schools; Other; Suicide; Young Adult Fiction.



FINAL PAPER
DUE DATE: February 11, 2022