

English 111, Section 005—Displaced Persons: Approaches to Prose Non-Fiction  
Summaries and Overviews, by Prof. Kevin McNeilly

As requested, I have drawn up a set of paragraph-long takes on key themes and talking points in the six main texts on our course syllabus. These paragraphs only suggest possible critical and interpretative trajectories through this material; use them, if you wish, as starting points for your own readings of these texts.

David Chariandy's *I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (2018) tries, as the title suggests, to find the means both to disclose and to discuss unacknowledged or suppressed antagonisms around his experience of racism in Canada. It's important to recognize that this extended letter addressed to his daughter – the book is an extended essay in epistolary form – builds on the concept of the essay (or *essai*, in [Michel de Montaigne's sixteenth-century French](#)) as an attempt, as an open-ended experiment in how to put his complex and fraught encounters with racial interpellation (being “hailed” or identified) into words, how to frame his thinking around race and to communicate those experiences to (and with) his family. He develops a pluralistic concept of heritage, community and ethnicity based on a respect for difference and diversity and a resistance to seeing the human “mix” in terms of sameness; he admires what he calls the “luminous specificity” of human experience. By the close of the book, he argues for an open-minded and attentive practice of “listening.”

Lawrence Hill's op-ed in the June 1, 2018 issue of *The Globe and Mail*, “Act of Love: The Life and Death of Donna Mae Hill,” makes an argument for a compassionate approach to physician-assisted death or assisted suicide by narrating the final days of his mother's life, as he accompanies her to a clinic in Switzerland. The extended essay braids together three time-lines— anecdotes from his mother's life, a narrative of her last days and assisted suicide, and a brief account of the present time of writing the essay at his desk—to reflect on what we called intersubjectivity, the ways in which lives and voices are enmeshed in each other. His prose describes and

enacts diegetic practices—ways of telling—that, as speech-acts and “acts of love,” create necessary human connection.

As an extended series of interlaced, page-long fragments, *Diamond Grill* forms what Fred Wah calls a “biotext,” an assemblage of life-stories that weave in and out of each other. Wah is particularly concerned with questions of racial identity and mixing: one of the most significant dishes served at the family restaurant run by his father (who also shares his name) is “mixed grill,” a jumble of European and Chinese foods. The swinging door in the Diamond Grill between the public space and the kitchen is also a crucial figure for Wah of the hyphen, as in the ligature between “Chinese” and “Canadian” in Chinese-Canadian. Wah works to find the means to inhabit that in-between “contact zone,” where he engages with what he calls “the dissonance of encounter, the resonance of clashing tongues.” Through the recombinant, DNA-like form (according to him) that his writing takes, Wah seeks to negotiate with difference and to reconcile himself to that on-going, hyphenated clash.

Each of the chapters of Marjane Satrapi’s graphic memoir, *Persepolis*, translates crucial moments in her personal history—as a teenage girl in Tehran, growing up through the Iranian revolution—for a contemporary French audience. Her episodic depiction of her adolescence, mapping a trajectory of personal transition and developing self-awareness, wants also to offer a corrective to misperceptions about both “life in Iran” and Iranian national history, as an “old and great civilization”; the text is a memoir, for her, not merely as a narrative of memories of her youth but also, significantly, as a memorial to her fellow Iranians

who lost their lives in prisons defending freedom, who died in the war against Iraq, who suffered under various repressive regimes, or who were forced to leave their families and flee their homeland . . . .

(“Introduction,” [vi]).

Her drawings both represent and enact a visual engagement with the strictures of authoritarian control, as Marji tests the boundaries, and bears witness to the limits,

of who she is allowed to be, and to become. When in the opening chapter of the text, Marji declares at school that she wants to be a prophet when she “grow[s] up,” a declaration that her teacher regards with cynical horror but that her “puzzled” parents affirm is a child’s imaginative prerogative, she also activates a tension around visibility—between the visual and the visionary, between the witness and the seer, between looking and insight—that informs the set of antitheses and contradictions, especially between the traditional and the modern, that inform her fraught sense of belonging, of being a young Persian woman.

In *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Claudia Rankine confronts the pervasive micro-aggressions that she faces in her everyday life as a Black American woman. Her text is a multi-modal assemblage, an instance of intermedia, combining printed text (designed in stark black and white by her collaborator, John Lucas) with photographs of visual media by other artists, scripts for internet videos (also realized in collaboration with John Lucas), audio, sports television excerpts (especially around Serena Williams), and more. Rankine addresses the ways in which black bodies are presented, interpreted and contained against “a sharp white background” (a line she takes from Zora Neale Hurston, via artwork by Glenn Ligon). She composes a number of elegies for young Black men (“my brothers . . .”), and creates fading typographical monuments that both acknowledge and enact their disappearance from public view. She is interested in the ways in which works of art, through shifting focus and points-of-view, can become politically charged and provocative.

In *Findings* (2005), Kathleen Jamie’s essays revolve around four main themes or trajectories: the archeological (involving visits to Paleolithic digs), the ecological (involving encounters with the non-human), the bio-medical (involving visits to hospitals, museums and medical institutions), and the ornithological (involving encounters with birds). She positions herself as a tourist, a visiting outsider, something of a stranger in her own familiar Scottish context. Her writing engages with issues around what we now call the Anthropocene, the epoch of human impact

on the climate and on the planet itself. She focuses in on different, conflicted senses of time: the present, human history, natural history, deep time. Each essay is typically framed by encounters with edges, margins, shorelines and contact zones. She concerns herself with her “findings” in each of these moments of discovery and encounter not to advocate for the power of human, anthropocentric knowledge-gathering, but rather to test and acknowledge the limits of human dominion and understanding; these are essays that lean in to unknowing, and think lyrically through the ethics and implications of human technology, of the craft of human expression.