

*In Quarantine with Anne Frank: Lessons from the Holocaust for Today*

HONS H396-033 (Honors Social Justice Seminar)

Professor Naomi Yavneh Klos

Spring 2021

MWF 11:30-12:20

Note: Although this class will be taught in-person, students may also participate via zoom.

“In Quarantine with Anne Frank” explores Anne Frank’s experience and diary in the larger context of the Holocaust and of today. By thinking critically about the historical events, political systems, and personal choices that led to the death of Anne and 11 million other marginalized people at the hands of the Nazis, students will consider parallels and intersections with our own nation’s history, and contemplate solutions to the contemporary challenges laid bare during the Covid pandemic: inequity, radical incivility, and systemic racism.

Partnering with the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, students will share Anne’s story, historical context and the diary itself with middle and high school students from New Orleans public schools, in order to explore issues of tolerance, inclusion, bystandership, and racism in a majority Black southern city. Students will learn to recognize and act on their responsibility to further justice.

As an honors social justice seminar, “Anne Frank in Quarantine” will train students to draw on the tools of the humanities -- close analysis of texts and images; storytelling, ethics -- as we grapple with the events of both the Holocaust and New Orleans’ civil rights struggles, and consider contemporary challenges. Analyzing Anne’s diary in class and sharing her story with high and middle school students will encourage -- for both Loyola students and their younger counterparts -- critical reflection about, and engagement with, foundational questions of identity, privilege, and systemic racism.

### **Why Anne Frank**

In the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, the name “Anne Frank” was repeatedly invoked, whether as a Facebook meme, whining about sheltering in place, or a stern warning never to forget the unique horror of the Holocaust. But, despite Anne Frank’s iconic status, many students have not actually read her diary. They do not know her story or its context in the

Dutch experience of World War II -- that, for example, the Netherlands lost a higher percentage of its Jewish population than did any other country in Western Europe, or that, in the last months of hiding, Anne significantly revised her own diary in hopes of creating a document for posterity. Envisioning Anne as a “little Dutch girl,” students are unaware that she was, in fact, an immigrant from Germany, writing in her second language; Anne’s family, like so many other contemporary Jewish families, was denied permission to emigrate to the United States because of America’s enduring fear of refugees.

What can college students learn from a girl in hiding, and share with New Orleans high school students, in our own time of anxiety and uncertainty, of social distancing, of deep political division and exposed inequity?

First, even 75 years after the end of World War II (unfathomably long ago to a student born in the 21st century), its lessons for our own historical moment are inescapable. The Nazis drew on the legislation of the American South to stigmatize, racialize, and “other” the Jews who, until the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, were German citizens. Long before a final solution was formulated, arbitrary constructions of race based in antisemitic pseudo-science designated Jews as a biological underclass.

The Holocaust can also help students understand the pressures and consequences of bystandership, whether in failing to address the violence of a lynching or the bullying that may be part of their own quotidian experience. What kind of pressures, we might ask, encourage conformity and complicity?

Finally, we cannot underestimate the power of Anne’s story, and her diary itself, as a point of connection. Anne Frank’s descriptions of the tedious and sometimes terrifying life in the Annex, the cramped quarters and constant fear combined with puberty and first kisses, put a face on the unfathomable horrors of the Holocaust. And even without knowing its historic context, young readers consistently identify with Anne’s sense of alienation, of being misunderstood. The text has additional resonance in a time of social distancing, when many students, like Anne, have lost loved ones, or are experiencing isolation. And many New Orleans teenagers live with the fear not of Nazis but of gun violence.

Without diminishing Anne's experience or that of the millions of others who similarly perished, this connection provides entry to contemporary concerns, reminding students that stereotypes are a dangerous form of "othering," that hatred and white supremacy left unchecked lead to death and destruction, and that Black lives, like Jewish lives, matter. Anne's story, like the Holocaust itself, can inspire us to ask, not, "what would I have done?" but rather, "what will I do?"