

Women's Studies 540
Women of Color Writing Culture
Theme: Life Narratives

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Office hours: Mondays 2:30-4:30 and by appointment

Course Description:

Life stories are not only entertaining narratives. Autobiographies and memoirs can serve as examples of well-lived lives and may be used as ideological touchstones for larger political projects or messages. Quite often, they have been used as evidence—of religious conversion or the wrongs done to an individual who is representative of a larger population. Life stories are clearly important politically—why else would politicians so focus on their origins, that of their families, and their successes? The stories they tell about their lives are typically designed to demonstrate both their exceptionalism and representativeness. Thus a politician might suggest that he rose to success with few advantages—which is atypical—but the story then stands as the fulfillment of the American dream that is “representative” of the ideal U.S. citizen.

The life stories of women of color very self-consciously negotiate this relationship between the exceptional and representative, but often challenge the idea of ideality. In this course we'll read the life stories of women of color and see how these stories speak to larger political projects and social issues. Students will complete the following objectives in this course:

- Be exposed to a variety of different life stories written by women of color
- Learn about the autobiography as a particular literary art form
- Learn about the various histories and contexts informing the production of memoirs by African-American, Asian, Chicana, Middle Eastern, and Latin American women
- Learn tools for conducting literary analysis

Required Texts

Faith Adiele *Meeting Faith: The Forest Journals of a Black Buddhist Nun*
Angela Y. Davis *Are Prisons Obsolete?*
Linda Hogan *The Woman Who Watched Over the World*
Mari Matsuda *Where is Your Body?*
Rigoberta Menchu I, *Rigoberta Menchu*
Marjane Satrapi *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*
Zip Publishing Course Pack

Grade Distribution

Participation	10%
(On-line Question Postings, Class Discussion)	
Presentation	15%
Mid-Term Exam	25 %
Final Exam	25 %
Paper	25 %

Participation

Class participation is ESSENTIAL to the success of the class. I recognize that everyone is not comfortable speaking class, so to facilitate participation, I require you to post a brief, substantive question or response on CARMEN (<http://telr.osu.edu/carmen/>) about the readings. I will post a question prompt for the reading, and you will only write 1-3 sentences/questions for each class. You must post **by 9:00 a.m. on the morning of class**. I will read these responses/questions prior to every class and use them as prompts for class discussion. Your attendance grade is tied to these responses—but someone who posts but does not attend class will not receive a grade for the day. Students with **excused** absences can write slightly longer responses in order to make-up the work. A missed response/absence is a 0 for that day. If for some reason you have technological difficulties posting one day, bring your question to class. There will be 15-17 participation grades of 100, 80, or 0.

Presentation:

Each student will pair up (there may be one or two groups of three, depending on the final class size) and present on an article related to the theme of the class. The articles are available through a link on CARMEN. Students will sign up for presentation topics on 9/26. For each presentation, you will:

- Provide a 1-page handout discussing important themes and arguments in the article.
- Link the content of the article explicitly to the reading.
- Provide 2-3 discussion questions for the class that relate the theme of the article to the text read by the entire class.

The presentation will customarily take place during the second half of class, after a 5 minute break. Students are encouraged to think creatively about these presentations—visual aids, exercises, etc . . . that will encourage class discussion.

Exams:

You will take two Take-Home essay exams. The Final Exam will be cumulative, but will focus on the latter half of the course and will not be any longer than the Mid-Term. Exams will be based on my lectures, class discussion, and classroom presentations. It is thus VERY important to be present in class and take good notes. The Take Home exams will be made up of two short essays and one longer essay, and be evaluated on the following:

1. Demonstrated knowledge of readings
2. Ability to place texts in historical contexts
3. Demonstrated knowledge of theories on memoir and autobiography
4. Grammar, sentence structure, clear thesis
5. Application of knowledge that includes some original analyses of the texts (i.e., not discussed in class). An A exam must demonstrate original thinking.

Papers:

Each student will write a 5-7 page paper discussing a memoir or autobiography by a woman of color. Students are encouraged to discuss either some aspect of the classroom text that has NOT BEEN DISCUSSED IN CLASS, or to choose another life story for analysis. There is a list of possible books posted on CARMEN, but the list is by no means exhaustive. This is not a research paper, although one or two sources for context and/or background will most likely prove necessary. Students will demonstrate an ability to apply techniques used in reading life stories learned in class. Students MUST meet with me and discuss their paper topics.

Policies and Procedures

Attendance and Participation:

I expect you to attend every class. An absence (and no question) will be recorded as a 0 participation grade for the day. If you have an excused absence, bring documentation to avoid the 0 entry.

On Writing:

Learning how to write is a continuous exercise. As you work on your writing for this course, I encourage you to come to me for help. You are also fortunate to have a Writing Center at OSU. The center aids students of all skill levels. Please take advantage of the free tutoring if you feel the need. The OSU Writing Center is located in 475 Mendenhall Laboratory, on the south end of the oval. Their phone number is 688-4291, and their website is cstw.ohio-state.edu/writing_center/index.htm.

Plagiarism:

The following is this department's expanded statement of The Ohio State University's policy on plagiarism:

As defined by University Rule 3335-31-02, plagiarism is "the representation of another's works or ideas as one's own; it includes the unacknowledged word for word use and/or paraphrasing of another person's work, and/or the inappropriate unacknowledged use of another person's ideas." Plagiarism is one of the most serious offenses that can be committed in an academic community; as such, it is the obligation of this department and its instructors to report all cases of suspected plagiarism to the Committee on Academic Misconduct. After the report is filed, a hearing takes place and if the student is found guilty, the possible punishment ranges from failing the class to suspension or expulsion

from the university. Although the existence of the Internet makes it relatively easy to plagiarize, it also makes it even easier for instructors to find evidence of plagiarism. It is obvious to most teachers when a student turns in works that is not his or her own and plagiarism search engines make documenting the offense very simple. You should always cite your sources (I can help you with this if you are unfamiliar with proper styles of documentation). Always ask questions **before** you turn in an assignment if you are uncertain about what constitutes plagiarism. Always see your TA or professor if you are having difficulty with an assignment. To preserve the integrity of OSU as an institution of higher learning, to maintain your own integrity, and to avoid jeopardizing your future, **DO NOT PLAGIARIZE!**

Disability Services:

Any student who feels he/she may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact the instructor privately to discuss your specific needs. Please contact the Office for Disability Services at 614-292-3307 in 150 Pomerene Hall if you need further assistance.

Reading Schedule

Sept. 21 W Introduction

“History, like geography, lives in the body and it is marrow deep.”

Methodological Questions: What is Autobiography? Memoir? How do we read stories of a life?

Sept. 26 M Hogan, 14-112

Sept. 28 W Hogan 113-207
(Time to Meet with Presentation Partner)

“By no means a singular one”

(Extended Office Hours: Mandatory Meetings this week)

Methodological Questions: How do we use life stories as evidence? Can we? Should we?

Oct. 3 M (CP) Prince

Presentation 1: Barbara Baumgautner “The Body as Evidence: Resistance, Collaboration, and Appropriation in the The History of Mary Prince ”

“We Just Telling Stories”

Oct. 5 W *We Just Telling Stories* (film)
Davis *Prisons* Chapters 1, 2, 4

Methodological Questions: How do we apply “theory” to reading a life story?

Oct. 10 M (CP) Davis; Davis *Prisons* Chapters 5-6
Presentation 2: <http://www.incite-national.org> (*Mission Statement, Joint Statement with Critical Resistance, and Community Accountability within the People of Color Progressive Movement*)

“I look to my own experience and the experience of other like me to understand the world and decide how to move it.”

Methodological Question: How can life stories serve an intervention into other kinds of narratives?

Oct. 12 W Read Matsuda, Introduction, Chapters 1-6
(Choose Book/Paper topic by this date)

Oct. 17 M Read Matsuda through Part II
Presentation 3: Patricia Williams “The Brass Ring and the Deep Blue Sea” and “The Death of the Profane”

Oct. 19 W Matsuda Conclusion
Take-Home Exam Questions Distributed

Oct. 24 M Excerpt from Margaret Cho’s *I’m the One that I Want* (film)
Mid-Term Exam Due

“My personal experience is the reality of a whole people.”

Methodological Questions: How do we evaluate “truth” and the idea of “truth” in a life story? What does it mean to stand for a collective?

Oct. 26 W *When the Mountains Tremble* (film)
Read *I, Rigoberta Menchu* Chapters 1-12

Oct. 31 M *I Rigoberta Menchu* Chapters 13-25
Presentation 4: Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith “Conjunctions: Life Narratives in the Field of Human Rights”

Nov. 2 W *I, Rigoberta Menchu* Conclusion
Presentations 5: Daphne Patai “Rigoberta Menchu and the Politics of Lying” and Joan Bamberger “David Stoll’s ‘Litany of Complaints’ About Rigoberta Menchu”

Methodological Question: What difference does our expectations as readers make to the reading of a text?

Nov. 7 M Satrapi 1-86

Nov. 9 W Satrapi Conclusion

Presentation 6: Bronwyn Winter “Fundamental Understandings: Issues in feminist approaches to Islamism” and Margot Badran “Understanding Islam, and Islamic Feminism”

“Biomythography”

Methodological Question: What would a unified self look like? Is it possible? Is it desirable?

Nov. 14 M (CP) Moraga
Presentation 7: Cindy Cruz “Toward an Epistemology of a Brown Body”

Nov. 16 W (CP) Gomez, Lorde

“The Anthropology of Myself”

Methodological Question: How do our encounters with “others” shape our understanding of ourselves?

Nov. 21 M Adiele Chapters 1-6
Presentation 8: Charles Johnson “Reading the Eightfold Path” and “A Sangha by Another Name”

Nov. 23 W **No Class, Papers due by 2:00 p.m.**

Nov. 28 M Adiele Chapters 7-11

Nov. 30 W Adiele Conclusion
Exam Questions Distributed
Evaluations

Dec. 5 M FINAL EXAMS DUE IN MY MAILBOX BY NOON