

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:

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