

**Brandeis University**  
**Women's Studies Spring 2002**

**Tuesdays, 1:30- 4:30**

**180A Reading and Writing Autobiography:  
Creating An Ethnic, Gendered Self Through Language**

**Instructor:** Jyl Lynn Felman, Assistant Professor of Women's Studies  
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Office: Rabb 106 Office Hours: 11:00-12:00 Tuesdays & By Appointment

Prerequisite: Women's Studies 5A and/or Professor's Signature.

This three hour, weekly seminar will explore the ways in which lives are embedded within their social and cultural contexts, how those contexts change over time, and the ways in which men and women construct their lives. We will have a particular focus on the impact of sexuality, race, and culture on the construction of identity. Other social structures such as class, gender and ethnicity will be discussed in terms of the impact they have on race and sexuality. Examining their own lives in their particular cultural and historical contexts, students will create written autobiographical work, which reflects and synthesizes the theories discussed in class.

1. Students are expected to come to class having carefully read the material assigned for that day and to engage in serious discussion. Students will sometimes be required to develop three or four questions for discussion. **Class participation is 25% of the final grade.**
2. A series of short pieces written outside of class will be required as well as weekly in class writing. While most of the autobiographical work will be done individually, we are also going to be engaged with each other's work. Some class time will be devoted to sharing your work with a partner in small groups. Students are expected to participate in the weekly book discussions on the list-serve. **Weekly writing counts for 30% of the grade. No Late Work Will Be Accepted.**
3. The major paper for the course is a piece of autobiographical work which reflects your understanding of the intersections of race, sexuality, religion, ethnicity and gender on the construction of social identity. The work should be a minimum of 15 pages. All work must be typed, spell-checked, double-spaced and original for this class. **The autobiographical project counts for 45% of the final grade.**
4. Students will be partnered outside of class several times throughout the semester to interview each other on the theories discussed in class.

**Required Fieldwork: Tuesday evening @ 7:30, March 19<sup>th</sup>: World Premier of deaf playwright Michele Maureen Verhoosky's *Beyond The Blue*. Sunday 9:00 – 9:00, April 21<sup>st</sup>: Day long residency with *Double Edge Theatre* on "The Body as Narrative Text."**

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## 180A Reading and Writing Autobiography

Week One:

**Jan. 22**

autobiography? For Whom? What purpose(s) does it serve? Linear

**Section I: What is autobiography? What is significant about it?**

What forms do autobiography and social identity take? Who writes

Narratives vs. Non Linear Narratives: the use and abuse of significant detail.

**What is the meaning of a Social Identity :** Introduction To The Course

**Read:** First Half of When I Was A Puerto Rican, bring to class three questions or observations about the style the book is written in.

**Write:** A three page memory about a significant moment in your life.

Week Two:

**Jan. 29**

**Autobiography As A Social Construction Of A Life In Progress:** The function of Non Linear story telling; Rethinking Chronology and Linear Narrative; Writing As A Process of (self) Discovery

**Read:** Finish When I Was A Puerto Rican, bring three questions/comments to class about the success or failure of the end of the book.

**Video:** *Remembering Wei Yi-fang, Remember Myself*

**Write:** Write three pages on a significant person in your life using the concepts of significant details and linear narrative.

Week Three:

**Feb. 5**

**Myth,**

**Navigating Multiple Identities In A Multicultural World: The Function of Political Autobiography in Contemporary U. S. Society and Multiple Forms Of Autobiography: Letter Writing, Dialogue, Metaphor, etc... Act Of Writing: Prewriting, Writing, Rewriting**

**Read:** The Situation and the Story pgs. 1-85.  
Writing Down The Bones pgs. 1 (the intro) -29.

**Video:** *Identifiable Qualities: Toni Morrison*

**Write:** A three page nonlinear narrative about your favorite food or meal.

Week Four:

**Section II: Developing A Gender Consciousness and Prewriting,**

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**Feb. 12**

**Writing, and Rewriting: Vivid Writing/Finding Your Voice**

**Who is a Man: Impact of Race and Ethnicity on Gender in constructing the Self (Is white a color?)**

**Read:** First Half of Where the Body Meets Memory, bring to class three questions or observations about the style of writing.

**Video:** *Bill T. Jones, Gay African American Modern Dancer*

**Writing Assignment:** Map out your narrative by answering the following questions. Why do you want to do autobiographical work? What point do you want to make about your life? What is the purpose or significance of your story to yourself, to others? Who do you imagine your audience to be? What forms will you use? What concerns you the most about writing your autobiography? Identify the situation as separate from the story.

**Write:** Two pages comparing the writing styles of WIWAPR with WTBMM.

**Write:** Re write and expand food paper by bringing in ethnic and gender identity and memory and the construction of “the fragmented self,” through nonlinear narrative.

Week Five

**Feb. 19**

**No Class / Spring Break**

**Read: Finish Where The Body Meets Memory**

Week Six

**Feb. 26**

**Who is a Man/ What is Masculinity continued:**

**Pushing The Narrative Forward: Every Sentence Matters**

**Read:** Writing Down The Bones pgs. 30-99.

**Video:** *If Only I'd Been Born A Kosher Chicken*  
First twenty minutes.

**Write:** Five pages on your metaphor.  
Meet in partners outside class to discuss your metaphor before writing.

Week Seven:

**March 5**

**Who Is a Woman: Impact of Gender on Race in constructing the Self; Show Your Story Don't Tell It; and Self-Censorship in Writing (What comes first, gender or ethnicity?)**

**Read:** Breath, Eyes, Memory.

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**Write:** Four to five pages on your socialized gender identity verses how you consciously construct or deconstruct your own gender identity. Show through narrative who you were taught to be as opposed to who you are in terms of gender expectations.

Week Eight  
March 12

**Who Is a Woman/What Is Femininity continued.**

**Read:** The Situation and the Story pgs. 86 – 165.  
First half of Cancer In Two Voices.

**Video:** *Halving The Body*

**Write:** Re write and expand you metaphor paper or gender identity narrative.

Week Nine  
Mar. 19

**Section III: Embedded Lives: Socialization and Resistance**

**The Immigrant Experience: Intersections Of Language, Race, Gender, and Ethnicity: What Language(s) do We Write In?**

**Read:** Finish Writing Down The Bones.

Finish Cancer In Two Voices.

**Video:** *James Baldwin*

On reserve, watch in groups of three and write on how video and written narrative forms are related as “memory text.”

**Write:** Four to five pages on "Being A Tourist in Your Own Town."

Week Ten:  
Mar. 26  
Brandeis Thursday

**The Reclamation of Culture, History and Memory:  
The Art and Performance of Autobiography**

**Read:** First half of Soldier.

**Video:** *History and Memory: Akiko and Takashige*

**Write:** A four to five page paper on some aspect of your identity for the next class. You will have an opportunity to rewrite it before handing it in.

Week Eleven:  
April 2

**No Class Passover/Easter Break**

**Section IV: (Re)Creating The Self: Writing As Process: Selves In Progress Through Memory**

**Read:** Finish Soldier.

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**Write:** Rewrite Identity Paper and a three page re action paper to Soldier.

Week Twelve:  
**April 9**

### **Re Mapping Out Your Final Narrative**

**Read:** Cravings and write a three page literary critique of the text as credible memoir.

**Write:** Review all class writing to date and decided what to include, exclude, expand in your final narrative. Locate the situation as separate from the story and include a clear articulation of:

The aspect of your life that you are going to be working on.

What narrative techniques: linear, nonlinear, fragmentation, epistolary ...

Separate the form from the content and lead with content.

What tense, simple past, present .... Will you be writing in?

Why? Locate the point of view of the narrator.

Autobiographical work does not have the same kinds of road maps as do academic papers. This writing assignment is the application of the theories of autobiographical writing and the application of the social construction of identity on your own life that we have studied.

Through the selection of specific details, events and interpersonal relationships a portrait of a gendered, ethnic self will emerge that reflects your understanding of the nonfiction, creative writing process and the concepts of fluid identities, including the impact of race, gender, class, and sexuality on the self. Articulate the difference between “the situation” and the story that is the emotional memory that results from and thus recreates the “real” chronology of time, place, and space.

Week Thirteen:  
**April 17**

### **Playing With Form When Writing About The Self**

**Read:** One Optional Autobiography with a partner.

**Video On Reserve:** *Punch Me In The Stomach*

**Write:** Begin Final Autobiographical Project.  
A two page reaction paper to your book.

Prepare an informal oral analysis of your chosen book.

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Week Fourteen: **Intersections of Race, Sexuality and Culture: Writing Multiplicities  
April 24 and Playing With Form when Writing About the Self**

**Read:** Selected (to be assigned) essays from Half & Half.

Guest Writer: Leslie Lawrence

**Write:** Continue Final Autobiography.

Week Fifteen: **Navigating Fluidity/Shifting Selves  
April 30 Write: Edit and Rewrite Final Autobiography**

**Work in Partners outside of class, read and critique each other's work.**

Week Sixteen **Last Class  
May 7 Presentations of Autobiography to the whole Class.**

**Turn In Final Autobiography**

**ABSOLUTELY NO LATE PAPERS WILL BE ACCEPTED.**

**REQUIRED BOOKS**

1. June Jordan, Soldier: A Poet's Childhood, 2000, Basic Books
2. Edwidge Danticant, Breath, Eyes, Memory, 1994, Vintage.
3. David Mura, Where The Body Meets Memory, 1995 Anchor Books.
4. Sandra Butler and Barbara Rosenblum, Cancer In Two Voices. 1996, Spinsters.
5. Natalie Goldberg, Writing Down The Bones, 1986 Shambala.
6. Esmeralda Santiago, When I Was Puerto Rican, 1993, Vintage.
7. Jyl Lynn Felman, Cravings, 1997, Beacon.
8. Vivian Gornick, The Situation and The Story: The Art of Personal Narrative, 2001, Farrar, Straus and Giroux

**PICK ONE BOOK TO READ SPRING BREAK**

1. Claudine Chiawei O'Hearn, Half & Half, 1998, Pantheon.
2. Art Spiegelman, Maus, Volumes I and II, 1986, Pantheon.
3. Lucy Grealy, Autobiography of a Face, 1995, Houghton Mifflin.
4. Joy Kogawa, Obasan, 1981, Vintage.
5. Anna Deavere Smith, Talk To Me, 2000, Random House.
6. Fiffer and Fiffer, Body, 2000, Perennial.
7. Richard Rodriguez, Hunger of Memory, 1989, Penguin.
8. Jyl Lynn Felman, Never A Dull Moment, 2001, Routledge.