

Experiments in Autobiography

In this course we will consider several recent and contemporary works of literary autobiography with the aim of exploring what writing “from life” might mean, and the various relations between that which we call “self” and that which we call “other” (or “world”). Along the way, we will grapple with the many provocative issues that attend the genre, including the nature of memory; differing conceptions of selfhood; the ethics of writing about others; the use of fact, fiction, research, and speculation; the so-called autobiographical pact; and the overlap of the personal and the political, including the roles played by race, gender, sexuality, history, and tradition in life writing. Students will try their hand at several short experiments in autobiography based upon our reading, which we will then discuss in a variety of workshop settings. For the final project, students will have the choice of revising and/or expanding one of their previous autobiographical pieces, writing a new piece, or writing a short critical paper (3-5 pages) on course material of their choosing.

Note: All readings will be provided to you at the start of the semester as PDFs, save for the last 2 books, Valeria Luiselli’s *Tell Me How It Ends* and Claudia Rankine’s *Just Us*, both of which you should purchase NOW. Please also **PRINT OUT each day’s reading** so that, when we read aloud together or discuss the text, you aren’t toggling between it and us on your screen (I will notice!). In lieu of Blackboard, we will use a Padlet for this class, available at <https://padlet.com/maggiemixnelson/2oxonjhly18717st>. Please consult the Padlet for syllabus, PDFs, and other info. You can post appropriate, course-related material and responses to the reading there as well. Note that the Padlet is for in-class use only; nothing posted there should be re-posted elsewhere on the internet.

Course Schedule:

WEEK ONE: INTRODUCTION + MEMORY WRITING

Jan 18: NO CLASS/ MLK Day

Jan 20: intro + the years of our lives: Jeff Clark’s “Some Information About Twenty-Three Years of Existence” (writing exercise)

WEEK TWO: MEMORY WRITING

Jan 25: deep memory: Alice Notley, from *Mysteries of Small Houses* (partners)

Jan 27: peak personal moment + external sources: Larry Levis, “Sensationalism” (+ in class exercise)

WEEK THREE: MEMORY WRITING

Feb 1: shares of memory piece in groups

Feb 3: shares of memory piece in groups

+ turn in memory piece to margarmn@usc.edu by 5 pm Feb 5.

WEEK FOUR: PORTRAITURE

Feb 8: family member: Hilton Als, Part One of *The Women*

Feb 10: friendship: Cathy Park Hong’s “An Education,” from *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*

WEEK FIVE: PORTRAITURE

Feb 15: romantic affair: Eileen Myles, "Robin," from *Chelsea Girls*

Feb 17: interview: Wayne Koestenbaum, "My Evening with Alec Baldwin," from *Cleavage*

WEEK SIX: PORTRAITURE

Feb 22: shares of portrait in groups

Feb 24: shares of portrait in groups

+ turn in portrait piece to me at margarmn@usc.edu by 5 pm on Feb. 26.

WEEK SEVEN: CHECK-INS

March 1: individual meetings

March 3: individual meetings

WEEK EIGHT: EXPERIMENTS

March 8: going out: Annie Dillard, "Total Eclipse" from *Teaching a Stone to Talk*

March 10: staying in: Bernadette Mayer, from *Midwinter Day*

WEEK NINE: EXPERIMENTS

March 15: autofiction: Ben Lerner, from *10:04*

March 17: speculative memory: Joy Harjo, from *Crazy Brave*

WEEK TEN: RESEARCH

March 22: shares of experiment in groups

March 24: shares of experiment in groups

+ turn in experiment piece to me at margarmn@usc.edu by 5 pm on March 26.

WEEK ELEVEN: RESEARCH

March 29: Eula Biss, "Relations," from *Notes from No Man's Land: American Essays*

March 31: Eula Biss, "Land Mines," from *Notes from No Man's Land: American Essays*

WEEK TWELVE: RESEARCH

April 5: Anne Carson, "The Glass Essay" from *Glass, Irony, and God*

April 7: NO CLASS / wellness day

WEEK THIRTEEN: PERSONAL/ POLITICAL

April 12: Valeria Luiselli, *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions* (first half)

April 14: Valeria Luiselli, from *Tell Me How It Ends in 40 Questions* (second half)

WEEK FOURTEEN: PERSONAL/ POLITICAL

April 19: Claudia Rankine, *Just Us* (first half)

April 21: Claudia Rankine, from *Just Us* (second half)

WEEK FIFTEEN:

April 26: shares of research or personal/political piece

April 28: shares of research or personal/political piece

turn in final piece to me by 5 pm on Friday, April 30, sent to margarmn@usc.edu.

Note: your final piece can be a revision + expansion of a previous piece, a piece inspired by our last reading unit, OR a critical paper (3-5 pages) on one of the readings we've done this semester.

Course Requirements:

to print, read, and bring the assigned reading for each class, and be prepared to discuss it;

to contribute regularly in an informed and respectful manner to class discussion;

to respond constructively to the writing of your peers in small groups and otherwise;

to complete all short pieces of writing as assigned, as well as a final piece of critical or creative work.

Grading:

50% of your grade will be based on your preparation of the reading, attendance, and participation in class discussion;

50% will be based on the quality of your written work.

Note: I will not be giving you grades on individual writing assignments, as these assignments are meant to be experiments for you to take risks and grow. I will, however, be checking in with each of you during Week Eight, at which time I will give you a sense of how you're doing in class so far, and tell you where I see room for improvement, if any.

Course Policies:

Due to the challenges of forging community on Zoom, and the fact that this is a seminar dependent upon conversation and exchange, I ask that you keep your video ON throughout our meetings.

If there are significant privacy or connectivity issues that impede your ability to do so, please let me know so that we can discuss them. Please also keep me apprised of any other issues that you feel might impact your class performance.

Please refrain from engaging with distractions as best you can during our seminar time. Some of these are beyond our control if we live with others, but some are not: eating on camera, moving around unnecessarily, repeatedly turning your camera on and off, multitasking (such as exercising while in class--yes, this has happened), reading your phone instead of listening to your peers--all of these can diminish not only your ability to concentrate, but also the ability of others to do so.

In discussion and workshops, please listen and respond to others in ways that acknowledge and respect their dignity as fellow inquirers and human beings, even (or especially) when you don't agree with them. Sharing autobiographical texts can make people feel vulnerable, which makes it extra important that we create a space of trust and respect. To that end, I ask that you not share people's writing with anyone outside of this seminar, and that you make every effort to talk about others' writing as living experiments more than as statements of fact about the person at issue. (For example, using the phrase "the narrator" rather than just saying "you" can make a big difference in workshops, and is also more accurate, as nonfiction creates narrators that do not necessarily represent the whole of ourselves.)

Being over 15 minutes late or leaving over 15 minutes early will count as an absence; multiple absences will affect your grade and your capacity to earn credit for the course. Please provide me with advance warning as you can about absences, emergencies, and other issues that may affect your participation and/or performance.

If you have questions about COVID-19 and/ or USC's facilities for student health or other support services, please ask. These are challenging times, and if you're struggling, know that you are not alone.

USC Policies:

Academic Conduct:

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Part B, Section II, “Behavior Violating University Standards” <https://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b/>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

Support Systems:

Student Counseling Services (SCS) - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling/>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1-800-273-8255

Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

Relationship & Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-4900 - 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp/>

Sexual Assault Resource Center

For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: <http://sarc.usc.edu/>

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX compliance – (213) 740-5086

Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. <https://equity.usc.edu/>

Bias Assessment Response and Support

Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response. <https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support/>

Student Support & Advocacy – (213) 821-4710

Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic. <https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa/>

Diversity at USC – <https://diversity.usc.edu/>

Tabs for Events, Programs and Training, Task Force (including representatives for each school), Chronology, Participate, Resources for Students