Writing Your Ancestry
K30.1336
Gallatin School
New York University
Spring 2012
M 03:30 PM-06:10 PM
702 Silver

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(Ask for me during my office hour; other times, ask to leave a written message in my mailbox on the 4th fl.)

Course Description and Objectives:
This workshop will give students the opportunity to practice elements of creative nonfiction through a multi-faceted approach to writing on ancestry and cultural heritage. The main goal will be a written exploration of the self to consider wider issues of history, community, identity, place, and family. The major assignments will be structured around various tasks: memoir writing will involve mining your memories of family to identify possible leads into the past; a personal essay will help to define themes and set scenes in the present; a reported historical piece will entail interviews of family members, academic research, and/or a visit to an ancestral site. These essays will be developed gradually with the help of shorter at-home assignments and in-class exercises on style, structure, and strategy. Revision will be built into the process, and we will read each other's work and give supportive feedback throughout the semester.

Course Materials:
- A standard notebook (8 1/2 x 11" pages) to write in during class sessions and/or a laptop
- A folder to keep all class handouts, exercises, drafts and graded assignments

Required reading:
- Additional handouts distributed during class session or posted on Blackboard

Major Assignments:
- Memoir: 6-7 pages
- Personal Essay: 6-7 pages
- History Assignment: 6-7 pages

More information about these assignments will be given closer to when they are due. Before you turn in an assignment for a final grade, a draft of it will be workshopped in class. (We'll use Blackboard to send each other drafts ahead of time.) You will then revise it based on the comments you receive; turn in your first draft (with comments) and the revised draft by the following session for a grade. Assignments that have not been workshopped will be deducted by one letter grade (e.g. a B assignment will receive a C). Late assignments will also be penalized, whether first or revised drafts, by 1/3 a letter grade for each day late. If you're absent (for a good reason) on the day an assignment is due, you can email me the assignment, but you must print out a hard copy and turn it in at the next class session, as well as your workshopped first draft, in order to get full credit. I won't accept an assignment more than a week late from the final due date.
Revision: The first two assignments can be revised after you receive a grade. I will average together the first grade and the grade after revision.

Page length: In order to not limit creativity, your writing can go under or over the suggested limit by a page or two. But you should produce at least 20 new pages of workshopped and revised writing during the semester. You can link these assignments thematically to create one long exploration into your family history (so that subsequent pieces are dependent on previous ones for content), or you can treat them as separate, stand alone pieces.

Supplemental assignments:

Ten writing exercises: one to two pages (300-600 words), hand-written or typed double-spaced
Every week (except when we have workshops) you will turn in a passage of experimental writing. You can develop these pages on your own to help work your way through your familial/ancestral material, or they can be derived from the writing exercises you do in class. I've also listed suggested writing prompts in the syllabus if you find you're blocked. You get to choose the one passage of writing you would like to turn in. The exercises are meant to help you regularly develop writing for the assignments; I will read them and comment briefly to advise you on what/how to develop.

Nine responses to readings: one to two pages (300-600 words), typed
Write a response to every set of readings, in answer to questions that I pose and any of the most striking aspects to you. Post these on Blackboard anytime during the week, until the deadline of one hour before our class meeting or you won't receive credit. I will read these but won't comment unless you ask me to do so within the response. They'll help you to work through your ideas about the elements of ancestry writing and to engage in our class discussion. Print them out and bring to class for your notes if you don't carry a laptop to class.

Three research exercises:
You'll use the internet, the library, and any other resources you have such as interviews with relatives and visits to ancestral sites to help you learn and write about your family history. I'll hand out guidelines for each one, and will ask you to report your findings in class.

Peer reviews:
These are the written comments you give to your peers on their writing during workshops. The number will be determined by our workshop arrangements.

Supplemental assignments are meant to help you develop your writing for the major assignments. They won't be graded, but you will receive a point of credit for each. The more you do, the better grade you will receive for them as a whole. I may assign additional ones over the course of the semester, as well as extra credit assignments. I won't accept these supplemental assignments more than a week late. You can email writing and research exercises to me if you explain the unavoidable circumstances that prevented their timely completion, but you won't receive credit until you turn in a hard copy to my office mailbox or at the following class session.

Participation: Contributions to class discussions, comments during peer workshops, and reading aloud of writing exercises are very important to this course. First of all, I'm really curious to learn what you're thinking! Besides, speaking in class makes you a more active learner, and your discoveries and questions help other students with their research and writing processes. Your discussion also helps me understand your progress through the material, so that I can shape the course to your benefit. Verbal feedback during workshop sessions helps you to become a better editor of your own writing.
Attendance: You are expected to attend every class. Missing more than two classes will affect your grade, as will habitual lateness. Arriving late or leaving early for more than ten minutes, on two occasions, will count as an absence. If you miss more than four classes, you'll fail the course. There are exceptions, of course, for sickness and family emergencies, so please inform me of any circumstances that prevent you from coming to class. If you can, let me know ahead of time if you know you will be late or absent.

Etiquette: Turn off cell phones and smart phones before you arrive to class. You can use a laptop during class to write or take notes, but don't let it distract you from our common tasks.

A note on plagiarism: If you plagiarize, you'll receive a 0 for the assignment and I’ll report you to the writing program. It won't be difficult for me to figure out if you've plagiarized since you'll be doing so much writing in this class. People usually plagiarize when they are stressed out or feel like they're not doing well in the class. If you are in this predicament, it’s better to talk to me, to get help and/or an extension, than to jeopardize your academic future.

Final Grade Breakdown:
Memoir: 25%
Personal Essay: 25%
History Assignment: 25%
Weekly Exercises, Research Exercises and Reading Responses: 15%
Participation: 10%
**Schedule:** Subject to change with our progress as a class. Please contact me if you're absent or miss part of a class session to confirm assignments. In-class activities are listed under each date. Homework (HW) is listed under the date assigned and is due the following class session. The topics of one-page reading responses will be announced in class and posted on Blackboard.

1. **Jan 23**  
   **In-class:** Introductions and overview of course. Handout in class: brief readings on family trees and the idea of the search. Preliminary writing exercises: on place and time (present and past).  
   **HW:** Read *The Color of Water*. Write reader response.  
   Suggested writing exercise: Start at the beginning

2. **Jan 30**  
   **In-class:** Discuss *The Color of Water* in terms of memoir, personal essay, investigative search and historical narrative. Readings in class: excerpts from *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston and *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel. Exercises on writing on a family member: writing in your voice and the voice of the family member.  
   **HW:** Read “Portrait of an Invisible Man” in *Invention of Solitude* by Paul Auster. Write reader response.  
   Suggested writing exercise: A family heirloom

3. **Feb 6**  
   **In-class:** Discussion of Auster. The past within the present during family rituals or attitudes. Exercises: Clues of the past; Showing vs. telling. Handout and discussion of memoir assignment  
   **HW:** Read *Fun Home*. Read brief excerpts from Broyard and Frazier that include photos. Write reader response. Bring in a family photograph -- one that you would most like to write on. Research exercise #1: Start looking at online ancestry sites, and query relatives who might have constructed a family tree or have access to historical info. Write a page on your findings and be prepared to discuss in class on Feb 13.  
   Suggested writing exercise: What was missing

4. **Feb 13**  
   **In-class:** Discussion and exercises on remembering through photographs. Discussion of research exercise.  
   **HW:** Write first draft of memoir assignment. Read any workshop submissions.

Feb 20 – No class, President's Day

5. **Feb 27**  
   **In-class:** Workshop of memoir assignment.  
   **HW:** Revise memoir assignment.  
   Read excerpts from *Me as her again* by Nancy Agabian, *Ithaka* by Sarah Saffian, *Brother, I'm Dying* by Edwidge Danticat, and *One Drop* by Bliss Broyard. Write reader response.  
   Suggested exercise: The conversation you would like to have
6. Mar 5
In-class: Memoir assignment due. Turn in your revised draft with peer comments. Discussion of readings: memoir leading into personal essay and/or interview. Handout on Research Exercise #2: an interview. Interview exercises. Handout and discussion on personal essay assignment.

HW: Read *Wealth Ribbon* by Brenda Lin. Write reader response.
Research exercise: Do an interview and keep a detailed journal of your experience. Be prepared to discuss this in class on Mar 19.
Suggested exercise: Symbolism in your family

Mar 12 – No class, Spring Break

7. Mar 19
In-class: Discuss *Wealth Ribbon* as a linked series of personal essays. Report on interview exercise.

HW: Read NY'er article by Henry Louis Gates, Chapter 2 from Ian Frazier, excerpts from *Where I Was From* by Joan Didion, *West of Then* by Tara Bray Smith and *The Family Silver* by Sharon O'Brien. Write reader response.
Suggested exercise: Fear and family

8. Mar 26
In-class: Discussion of personal essays on process and personal history: the search. Exercises on the historical/recurrent personality/identity. Mid-term evaluation: let me know how the class is going.

HW: Write first draft of personal essay assignment. Read any workshop submissions.

9. Apr 2
In-class: Workshop on personal essay assignment.

HW: Revise personal essay assignment.
Read "My Grandfather's Last Tale" by Lawrence Weschler, "What I See When I Look at the Face on the $20 Bill" by Sarah Vowell, “Literary Murder” by Julianna Baggott, and excerpts from *The Tea that Burns* by Bruce Edward Hall and *The Farthest Home is in an Empire of Fire* by John Phillip Santos. Write reader response.
Suggested exercise: a joke gone wrong

10. Apr 9
In-class: Personal essay assignment due. Turn in your revised draft with peer comments. Discussion on search combined with re-constructed history. Exercises on historical knowledge: filling in the gaps. Handout on Research Exercise #3: Find a history book or text related to your family history and take notes. Be prepared to discuss in class on 4/16 and 4/23.

Work on Research Exercise #3
Suggested exercise: make a collage of writing, your own with found texts

11. Apr 16
In-class: Discussion and exercises on structuring history, past and present. Discussion of historical findings. Handout and discussion on historical narrative/essay assignment.

HW: Read *The White Blackbird* by Honor Moore. Write reader response.
Continue taking notes from historical text(s).
Suggested exercise: self-portrait as a historian
12. Apr 23  
**In-class:** Discussion and exercises on constructing and re-constructing history. Continued discussion of historical findings.  
   **HW:** Write first draft of history assignment. Read any workshop submissions.

13. Apr 30  
**Workshop of history assignment.**  
   **HW:** Revise history assignment.  
   For your suggested exercise, please write a page reflecting on your writing this semester -- what you think you did well with and/or improved at, and what you would like to further pursue or work on more. Turn this in with your final assignment.

14. May 7  
**In-class:** History assignment due. Turn in with your revised draft with peer comments and the reflective exercise. Discussion of what's next: sharing with family, publishing, etc.  
   Party.