

## English 724

### Topics in Literature: Memoir and Place

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**Spring 2009**

“The events of one’s life take place, take place . . . they have meaning in relation to the things around them.” --*N. Scott Momaday*

What are the meanings of “place” for writers and readers of memoir? This seminar focuses on autobiographical writing with particular attention to issues of location. Our primary texts will be modern and contemporary works in English that incorporate autobiographical writing. We will study current theoretical discussions of autobiography as a genre or collection of genres; look at the ways memoirists “place” themselves rhetorically, politically, and especially geographically; and consider the meaning of place to readers as well as writers of memoir.

Topics will include memory and autobiographical truth, relationality in memoirs, politics of location, ethics of representation, and sense of place in autobiographical writing.

These are the general goals of the course:

- to become familiar with a variety of modern and contemporary autobiographical works, with particular attention to writers’ methods of self-representation
- to become aware of theories and research relevant to the study of autobiographical genres, particularly where the literary aspects of memoir intersect the geographical
- to develop strategies for discussing and interpreting memoirists’ locations of “selves” within a social and cultural as well as geographical context
- to gain experience writing memoir and critical interpretation; to prepare a conference-style presentation and an accompanying abstract

#### **Course Requirements and Grading:**

- Read as assigned for each class and attend and participate knowledgeably in all seminar discussions. 10%
- Respond in writing on the course WebCT to one or more of each week’s readings or to a relevant issue or question raised by a member of the class (8 responses). 15%
- Write an autobiographical essay or a multigenre piece including memoir. 15%
- Research the historical, geographical, cultural, and other relevant context for an autobiographical narrative of your choice; draft a brief critical essay to present to the seminar. 30%
- Write a scholarly position paper (with an abstract) on one of the issues or problems introduced in class. Present your argument or findings and lead a discussion in class. 30%

### **Primary texts for the course:**

Ahmed, Leila. *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—a Woman’s Journey*. Penguin, 1999.  
Arnold, Mary Ellicott, and Mabel Reed. *In the Land of the Grasshopper Song* (1957).  
Nebraska, 1980.  
Blunt, Judy. *Breaking Clean*. Vintage, 2002.  
Masumoto, David Mas. *Epitaph for a Peach: Four Seasons on My Family Farm*. Harper, 1995 .  
Menchú, Rigoberta, and Elizabeth Burgos-Debray. *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. Verso, 1984.  
Obama, Barack. *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* . Three Rivers, 1995.  
Ondaatje, Michael. *Running in the Family*. Vintage, 1993.  
Santiago, Esmeralda. *When I was Puerto Rican*. DaCapo, 1993.

Excerpts from Barber, Blew, Price, Momaday, Hale, Stegner, etc., provided via WebCampus

### **Suggested critical and background texts:**

Eakin, Paul John. *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*. Cornell, 1999.  
---. *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*. Cornell, 2008.  
Eakin, Paul John, ed. *The Ethics of Life Writing*.  
Fuchs, Miriam, and William Craig Howes, eds. *Teaching Life Writing Texts*. MLA, 2008.  
Larson, Thomas. *The Memoir and the Memoirist: Reading and Writing the Personal Narrative*.  
Ohio UP, 2007.  
Reaves, Gerri. *Mapping the Private Geography*. McFarland, 2001.  
Reynolds, Nedra. *Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference*.  
Southern Illinois, 2004.  
Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography*. Minnesota, 2001

*Assigned excerpts from most of these texts, along with other articles will be provided through WebCampus. However, excerpts from Reynolds and Smith & Watson will not be provided; those texts are on reserve.*

### **Procedure for WebCampus responses:**

You may extend the assigned reading (with additional examples or connections), take issue with it, ask questions of it, reflect on its implications, compare with another text, or have a dialogue with the author. You may respond to a question or comment posted by any of us. I would like us all to have a chance to read the WebCampus postings before our Wednesday class session; therefore, in order to receive credit, your posting must be made by *Sunday night* prior to class. In addition to these required postings *please respond to class members’ comments* online at *any time*. Also, you may skip *one week’s* WebCampus response with no effect on your grade.

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### **Schedule**

(Reading assignments subject to change)

**Jan. 21**            **Introduction to Autobiography and Place**  
Reading from “Western Memoirists Speak: A Panel of Writers”  
Mary Clearman Blew, Excerpt from *All But the Waltz*  
Phyllis Barber, Excerpt from *How I Got Cultured*  
John Price, “Man Killed by Pheasant”

- Jan. 28**                    **Autobiography, Identity, Location**  
 Reaves, *Mapping the Private Geography*, pp. 1-19.  
 Boardman & Woods, “Introduction: What’s Western about Western  
 Autobiography?” and “A Panel of Writers”  
 Leslie Marmon Silko, “Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination”  
 N. Scott Momaday, Introduction & part I of *The Way to Rainy Mountain*  
 Janet Campbell Hale, “Dust to Dust,” from *Bloodlines*  
Recommended reading in Smith & Watson: Ch. 1 & 2; skim Tool Kit, p. 165.  
 Begin Blunt, *Breaking Clean*
- WebCampus response #1: By *Sunday, January 25*. See “procedure” above.
- Feb. 4**                    **Inscribed by/into Place? Region and the Autobiographical**  
 Stegner, *Wolf Willow*, Part I: The Question Mark in the Circle  
 Blunt, *Breaking Clean*  
 Kowalewski, “Contemporary Regionalism”  
 Foote, “The Cultural Work of American Regionalism”  
 Comer, Introduction & Chapter 1 (skim) of *Landscapes of the New West*  
 WebCampus response #2
- Feb. 11**                    **The Ecology of Memoir**  
 Masumoto, *Epitaph for a Peach*  
 Perreten, “Eco-Autobiography”  
 Allister, “Writing the Self through Others”  
 Price, “Idiot Out Wandering Around”  
 Jones, “An Ecology of Emotion” (*optional*)  
 WebCampus #3
- Feb. 18**                    **The Place of Writing**  
 Reynolds, *Geographies of Writing*, Ch. 2.  
 Larson, *Memoir and the Memoirist*, Ch. 1, 2, and 15.  
 Smith & Watson, Ch. 3 (Autobiographical Acts”)—recommended  
 [possible excerpt from *Nickel & Dime*]  
 Post a draft of your Paper #1 to your writing group by Feb. 13, in preparation for  
 response and discussion in class
- Feb. 25**                    **On Location**  
 Arnold & Reed, *In the Land of the Grasshopper Song*  
 McDowell, Introduction from *Gender, Identity and Place*  
 Friedman, “Women’s Autobiographical Selves”; excerpts from *Mappings*  
 WebCampus #4  
 Revised Paper Assignment I due.
- Mar. 4**                    **Roots and Routes**  
 Obama, *Dreams from My Father*  
 Articles TBA on travel writing, celebrity memoir  
 Smith & Watson, Ch. 4 (History of autobiography)--recommended  
 WebCampus #5
- Mar. 11**                    **Place in the Family: Relationality**

Ondaatje, *Running in the Family*  
Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories*, Chapter 2  
Smith & Watson, Ch. 5 & 6 (overview of autobiography criticism)—recom'd.  
WebCampus #6

**Mar. 18**      **SPRING BREAK—NO CLASS**

Post a *substantial* draft of your Paper #2 to your writing group on or before March 13, in preparation for response and discussion in class.

**Mar. 25**      **Surveying Memoir(s) and Place(s)**

See assignment above.

Excerpts TBA

*Be ready to summarize/read parts of your Assignment #2 in class.*

**Apr. 1**      **Hybridity and Geographies of Exclusion**

Santiago, *When I Was Puerto Rican*

Kaplan, “Resisting Autobiography: Out-law Genres”

Revised Assignment 2 due.

WebCampus #7

**Apr. 8**      **Dwelling, Movement, and Activism**

Menchú and Burgos-Debray. *I, Rigoberta Menchú.*

Justice, “No Indian Is an Island”

Lauritzen, “Arguing with Life Stories”

Couser, “Making, Taking, and Faking Lives”

Eakin, Introduction, *Ethics of Life Writing*

WebCampus #8

**Apr. 15**      **Political Location and Feminist Geography**

Ahmed, *Border Passage*

Smith & Watson, “Introduction: Situating Subjectivity in Women’s Autobiographical Practices”

WebCampus #9

**Apr. 22**      **Presentations**

Reading TBA—assigned by presenters

WebCampus: Please post your abstract to the class on the Sunday preceding your presentation.

**Apr. 29**      **Presentations**

WebCampus: Please post your abstract to the class on the Sunday preceding your presentation.

Reading TBA by presenters

**May 6**      **Presentations and seminar party**

Meet at my house—1871 California Ave., 4:00 pm

Reading TBA by presenters

**May 13**      **Absolute deadline for all course work.** I will be available in my office 2:30-5.  
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## First Writing Assignment

Approximate length: 1500 words

Draft due to be posted February 13<sup>th</sup> for discussion in class February 18<sup>th</sup>.

Revision due: February 25

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I would like you to compose a piece of autobiographical writing (in prose) that includes some metacommentary. That's it.

Tips:

- Although this course is subtitled “memoir and place,” your piece needn't be “about” a place or aimed at evoking a “sense of place.”
- You may choose to write a traditional essay, or you may prefer some other genre or experimental form. I prefer that you not write poetry (though you may include poetry) or dramatic dialogue (play script). If you want to envision this piece as a chapter in a longer work, that's fine.
- The metacommentary may be woven into the narrative—as Blew and Hale do it. Or you may wish to separate your metacommentary entirely from the autobiographical narrative—as Stegner does, to a certain extent. Or the piece you produce may be largely metacommentary (or theory or explanation), with stories woven into it as examples—on the order of Silko's “Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination.” Another option might be to try an experimental form, something like Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. You might do autobiographical fiction, but you will still be obliged to provide metacommentary on the relationship of life events to your piece of fiction, or on your refusal of the “autobiographical pact.”
- Topics for the metacommentary might include memory, the relationship of fiction to nonfiction, the portrayal of experience, ethical questions, narrative versions, autobiographical “truth,” personal identity, the importance of place, and so on. I would recommend that you begin with your autobiographical writing and let the metacommentary grow out of that—but you might prefer some other approach.
- This probably doesn't need saying . . . but . . . less is more. Don't try to cover your whole life or even a year of your life.

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**Second Writing/Presentation Assignment**

Approximate length: 7 minutes (no longer than 10!); 2000 words (about 7 pp.)

Drafts to writing group: suggest March 13

Informal presentation should be prepared for class on March 25

Revised paper due: April 1

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I have three goals for you in this assignment--beyond the usual the usual ones of good thinking, reading, and writing:

- introduce us (and, I hope, yourself) to a memoir or other piece of autobiographical writing that is interesting for its treatment of "place."
- place the work in its geographical context (broadly defined) and be able to select relevant details to present to the seminar
- place your chosen text in critical context by applying one of the critical approaches or frames we've read and discussed in class (e.g., relationality, eco-autobiography, regionalism, autobiographical act, place and identity, location).

The assignment:

Choose a memoir that is not on our class reading list but that has some relevance to our discussions of place and memoir; you may wish to choose a text that has some connection with a book on our reading list. Read this text and research its context: for example, historical events mentioned by the author, physical geography, cultural background, controversies, means of production of the text, popular and critical reception.

Write a critical review of this book that includes the following: a summary or at least enough background on the book's contents so that someone who hasn't yet read the book can understand what it's about; relevant context; a critical discussion (and evaluation?) of the book that is framed by one of the critical perspectives we've dealt with in this class.

From this material prepare a brief (5-7 minute) presentation for the seminar that introduces the class to the book and presents one or two key points that will aid the class in placing the memoir in physical-cultural context and in critical context.

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### Writing Assignment III

Approximate length: 2000 words

Suggestion: arrange for exchange of early drafts with your writing group the week of April 20

**Final draft due to me May 8.** However, if you want comments from me on a draft, your deadlines will be April 29 (draft) and no later than May 11 (final).

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This paper is simply an “academic argument”: it is to be a critical position paper that deals in some depth with one of the issues or problems introduced in class. (It would be nice, but not necessary, for this problem to be connected in some way with place or location.) You will illustrate and/or test your ideas through examples drawn from several different pieces of autobiographical writing, and I assume you will also be referring to the work of critics and scholars you have found helpful—or infuriating.

Please discuss with me if you wish to connect your work on this paper to an ongoing project or to work you have done for another class. Use MLA style for format and citations.

- This is a conference-length paper. As you draft and look for ideas, work toward a manageable, arguable, engaging, even provocative thesis. Then “simply” develop that thesis by supporting it and refuting possible objections.
- A rather lengthy example of what I am talking about is Eakin’s discussion of relational autobiography. In one section of that chapter, he argues that the “relational” memoir is at the center, rather than at the margins, of the genre of autobiography. He illustrates with several extended examples taken from contemporary autobiographical writing.
- One possibility would be to discuss an ethical question (again, I hope it will have something to do with memoir and place), using as examples some of the memoirs you have read. (In one example we have yet to read, Mills discusses *I, Rigoberta Menchú* in connection with one of the points she makes about truth in representation in autobiography.)
- Once again, I will be glad to discuss possibilities with you individually, via email, WebCampus, or conference, especially if you would like some help with focusing the approach or locating useful criticism or other scholarly work.

You will also need to write a 200-250-word abstract of this paper and post it on WebCampus a few days prior to your presentation in class. (The Sunday before your scheduled class would be best.)