

Methods and Materials: Memoir

Summer, 2018

August 20-24, 27-31

1-5 PM, Kresge 159 (except Friday, 8/24 in Porter Study Lounge)

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(Micah can be available to meet before class most days, email or talk to her in class to make an appointment)

Brain Blanchfield in his book *Proxies: Essays Near Knowing*, began each piece: *Permitting Shame, Error and Guilt, Myself the Single Source*

Michelle Tea's description of writing memoir: "an ecstasy of communion with yourself that facilitates the transcendence of your self"

James Baldwin: "You cannot describe anything without betraying your point of view, your aspirations, your fears, your hopes. Everything."

Course Description:

This course is an exploration of the memoir genre. We will read creative and craft-oriented texts, from Augustine through contemporary experimental writers, in order to explore some fundamental sites of tension in the genre: truth, imagination, memory, identity formation, the self as cultural/historical subject, the self as narrative in relation to other narratives.

What I hope you get out of the course: a basic understanding of memoir as a creative and craft practice and the stakes and preoccupations of the genre in relation to other genres; practice in risk-taking when writing about the self; practice in the process of questioning your own perceptions or "circling;" practice in the delicate art of workshoping memoir; practice in close reading one's own work, the work of other students, and professional work; practice editing your own work and the work of your peers; practice in treating others' work and points of view with respect; practice seeing clearly.

Required Reading:

Reader, \$27.25 at Bay Tree and some additional readings emailed to you as pdfs or handed out in class.

You are required to check your UCSC email every evening.

Required Writing:

7-12 page memoir, 12 point font, double-spaced (1750-3000 words); draft due the day before your scheduled workshop during second week in class; final revision due September 4th, emailed to me by midnight in a pdf document with the email subject:

Memoir Final. This prose memoir can be a series of short pieces or one piece or even a chapter from a longer work. Feel free to email the final draft to me sooner if you wish.

Four experimental creative/critical responses written during the first week outside of class. 500-1000 words, twelve-point font, double-spaced, paginated. These are always broken into two parts: critical reader response and creative reader response. You can staple/paperclip them together or hand them in separately. ALWAYS do the daily reading before you begin writing your creative piece.

Frequent in-class writing

Note about printing: you are required to type and print all your work for me. It is up to you if you want to make printed copies of your work for your small groups and for your large group workshop. I think you will find that you receive better feedback when you print it out, but you must weigh that against the costs of printing.

Grading Policy:

There are three areas in which you will be graded/evaluated:

Responsibility: no more than one absence, ideally no absences (if absent must make up all the work before 8/31, including responding to others' work), timely attendance, daily, respectful participation in seminar as evidence that you have read and thought about the work, no texting or going on-line during class (except during breaks in class), handing in of all required written work on time. Obvious care taken with the work—paginated, name on it, checked for typos and grammar, etc...

Experimentation/Revision: hard work on revising according to teacher's comments and peer comments, bold and sincere attempts to experiment with the concepts introduced in class. Pushing yourself to try new things and willingness to work in the "discomfort zone" (ie. take risks).

Working: excellence in terms of the craft/ theoretical concepts introduced in class (depth of engagement with retrospection, voice, experimenting with form, vivid language, search for meaning, "circling," etc...)

Letter Grade System:

If you accomplish all of the requirements under responsibility, you will receive some sort of B.

If you accomplish all of the requirements under responsibility and excel at Experimentation /Revision, Responsibility and/or Working, you will receive some sort of A.

If you do not accomplish all of the requirements under responsibility, you will receive less than a B, unless you are doing something outstanding in one of the other two areas. It is advisable not to count on doing something outstanding for your grade.

Any of the following will lower your grade and may get you a failing grade: two or more absences, disrespect of the teacher and/or student comments and/or student work, more than two tardies (arriving ten minutes or more after class starts), failure to hand in any of your work, failure to hand in rough draft and final version of memoir by deadlines.

A note about respect: it is very likely that someone will say or write something during our class that you find offensive, disturbing and/or troubling. Feel free to respectfully let the person know that the writing or verbal comment troubled you, and why. However, remember that it is not your job to silence, shame or shut down others in this class. I want us to have nuanced, thoughtful conversations that open up discussions, not close them down.

If you have DRC accommodations or extenuating circumstances that may affect your participation in the class, please let me know right away by giving me your form and/or make an appointment to talk to me about it and/or email me.

Trigger warning warning: As writers of memoir, we sometimes explore events and experiences that can uncover trauma and pain, and invoke a strong emotional response from both readers and writers in the classroom. We will be sharing our writing in this class, so please take a moment to ask yourself if you are emotionally prepared to workshop your piece and the potentially triggering work of others. Additionally, I ask that students consider the following:

- If you find that writing or reading about a particular issue has provoked more than ordinary anxiety or concern, I encourage you to contact the campus Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS). Counseling and Psychological Services is located in the Student Health Center across from Colleges 9/10 in the new East Wing on the 2nd floor (459-2628).
- Because of the nature of this course, it is not possible to offer a trigger warning for all of the potential topics that might be discussed while writing or workshoping each other's writing. Please consider this point, and expect to be exposed to writing on an assortment of topics, many of which have the potential to be triggering. In addition, please remember that writers not only work to delight, amuse and entertain their readers, but also to disturb and trouble them, not gratuitously, but in service of the themes and stakes of the text. I hope this class will be a "safe" space where each person feels respected; but you will not be protected from disturbance and trouble, because those are tools of a writer's trade and the place where a memoirist's intellectual and emotional work begins.

Daily Syllabus (changes announced in class and/or by email):

## WEEK ONE

Monday, August 20<sup>th</sup>

Introductions and Expectations

Tuesday, August 21st

2 Readings due: “Toward a Definition of Creative-Nonfiction” by Brett Lott in reader and “Against Memoir,” by Michelle Tea in reader.

Experiment 1 DUE in class today: 250-500 word response: List Lott’s definitions of creative non-fiction. What question or problem is Michelle Tea “circling”? How does Michelle Tea’s piece conform or not conform to Lott’s definitions? AND

250-500 words: Revise your “rules of your home” piece from Monday’s class with Brett Lott’s definitions and Michelle Tea in mind.

Wednesday, August 22nd

1. Good use of repetition, some strong details, Specificity—show you’ve read and thought about the reading—what are they circling? What is this? What did you learn (wisdom) what is folly?

Memoir as Confession

Readings due: excerpt of *The Confessions* by Augustine and Lydia Yuknavitch’s “Woven”

Experiment 2: 250-500 words: What is Augustine circling? What is he confessing? How would you describe his relationship to his audience (God)? 250-750 words double-spaced: write a confession with a specific audience in mind (if you want you could try braiding your confession in with another story, something that happened to you, or a fairytale or a news event or aspects of your culture that you think extends the meaning of your piece, the way Yuknavitch does).

Thursday, August 23rd

Lopate, Reflection and Retrospection and Baldwin

Experiment 3: 250-500 words: Where is an example in Baldwin’s work where he moves from scenic description to reflection and retrospection? What is Baldwin circling or reflecting on?

250-750 words: Think about a person you have complicated feelings about. Try to combine vivid description/scene with reflection and retrospection about those complicated feelings.

Friday, August 24th

Church, Kincaid, and Gurba—choose any two

Experiment 4: 250-500 Compare the distance (aspect of point of view) these writers have taken from their childhoods/youths. What techniques do they use to write about childhood/youth as adults?

250-750 words: Write about an event in your childhood using one of the distance/proximity techniques that Church, Kincaid or Gurba use.

WEEK TWO:

Monday, August 27<sup>th</sup>

Read: Alexander Chee's "Girl"  
Student full class workshops

Tuesday, August 28th  
Read Anzaldua's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" MOVE to last day  
Student full class workshops

Wednesday, August 29th  
Student full class workshops

Thursday, August 30th  
Student full class workshops

Friday, August 31<sup>st</sup>  
Student full class workshops



