

LT147 - FROM CONFESSION TO PERSONAL ESSAY: FORMS OF LIFE-WRITING

Course times: Wednesdays and Fridays, 9.00-10.30 am

Instructor: Laura Scuriatti

Office hours: online and in person by appointment

Course Description

What do we read when we read autobiographies, confessions, memoirs, personal criticism, autofiction and personal essays? Why would we want to read them? Do we want to know more about ourselves, the authors, the world, or do we behave like voyeurs? Do we treat these forms as literature, or as documents, or both? Is the readers' interest for life-writing a form of consumerism and exploitation?

In the last two decades life-writing and autobiography have become dominant forms, structuring both social media platforms and seeping into all literary genres and journalism; self-presentation and autobiographical modes of reading have become an almost inevitable ingredient of literature and criticism. Life-writing however, constitutes, in its different forms, a fundamental form in literary history, starting with the genres of the confession and evolving into the structuring principle of the emerging genre of the novel in the eighteenth century.

The course presents a host of different texts and forms in chronological order. It focuses on some of the fundamental questions: the relationship between truth and fiction in narrative, the shape of self in different forms, the work of memory, the consequences of narrative intimacy, the tension between invention and disclosure, the relationship between literary style and representation of self and mind, between life-writing and the novel as instruments to represent and understand the world. Starting from early examples of life-writings, students will examine canonical texts, such as Augustine's *Confessions*, Rousseau's *Confessions*, Montaigne's *Essays*, modernist and contemporary autobiographies, works of autofiction, and personal essays, including texts by Virginia Woolf, Joan Didion, Audre Lorde, Frederick Douglass, Annie Ernaux, Clarice Lispector, Edward Said, Jia Tolentino. Students will also engage with critical works on the genre and reflect on the ideological and historical meaning of autobiographical forms.

Course texts

Students are expected to own or borrow the course texts. Shorter texts will be uploaded on the course's electronic website. All other texts should be bought by students or borrowed from the library.

The library owns a few copies of the course texts that can be consulted or borrowed by students. A reserve shelf with relevant texts and suggested readings will be available for study and research connected to the course.

Please make sure you buy or borrow the following texts:

Augustine, *Confessions*

Italo Svevo, *Zeno's Conscience*

Audre Lorde, *Zami. A New Spelling of My Name*

Annie Ernaux, *The Years*

Requirements

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Attendance

For this class attendance is mandatory, and active participation in discussions will be an essential part of the course. Participation consists in contributing productively to class discussion in a respectful manner, and in demonstrating a sound knowledge of the texts assigned. Readings should be done in advance of the class for which they are assigned.

Participation also requires coming to class with the relevant texts and seminar materials.

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences per semester from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent should not affect the participation grade or require documentation.

Bard College Berlin does not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR SPRING 2022: Some students may need to begin the semester remotely due to travel restrictions caused by the pandemic. In addition, all students and instructors must refrain from in-person attendance if they are feeling ill. Instructors should make efforts to offer alternatives to in-person attendance where needed, including remote participation or asynchronous options.

Assessment

Students will be assessed on the basis of regular participation and on the basis of written and oral assignments.

Required assignments for the course are: **ONE WRITTEN EXAM** (1000 words), **ONE ESSAY** (2000 words) and **ONE PRESENTATION** (1000 words) on a chosen text. The essay can be a piece of creative writing based on the texts discussed in class. Students will be asked to choose a text for presentation immediately after the add/drop period.

Throughout the course students will be asked to participate also through **posting comments on digital platforms** (padlets) – these assignments will be considered part of the participation grade.

All assignments must be completed in order to pass the course.

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where an instructor agrees to accept a late essay, it must be submitted within four weeks of the deadline. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

Participation: 30%

Exam: 25%

Essay: 25%

Presentation: 20%

Deadlines

WRITTEN EXAM: 25 March

FINAL ESSAY deadline: Sunday 15 May, 23:59 hr

Schedule

Week 1– Introduction to the course: Biography/Autobiography/Autofiction/Biofiction

Please note: For the first seminar please prepare a short autobiographical piece (in any format you may choose, including digital ones) to read/show in class.

Wednesday 2 February:

Adriana Cavarero: “On the Outskirts of Milan” and “In a New York Bookstore”, in *Relating Narratives. Storytelling and Selfhood*

Friday 4 February:

Edward Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (selection)

Paul-John Eakin, “What are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?”

Week 2– A Sort of Beginning: Saint Augustine, *Confessions*

Wednesday 9 February:

Augustine, *Confessions*, Books I-II

Friday 11 February:

Augustine, *Confessions*, Books VIII and X

Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (pp. 127-142)

Week 3 – Fragments of Autobiography: Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*

Wednesday 16 February:

Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, Book I: “To the Reader”, Essays 1-3 and Essay 9 “On Liars”

Friday 18 February:

Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, Book I: Essay 21 “On the Power of Imagination”, Essay 55 “On Smells”

Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, Book II, Essay 1 “On the Inconstancy of Our Actions”

Week 4 – Confessions and Moral Examples: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Frederick Douglass

Wednesday 23 February:

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions* (selection)

Friday 25 February:

Frederick Douglass, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (selection)

Week 5 – Selfhood and Person

Wednesday 2 March:

Paul Ricoeur, "The Question of Selfhood", in *Myself as Another*, pp. 1-25

Friday 4 March:

Paul Ricoeur, " 'Person' and Identifying Reference", in *Myself as Another*, pp. 27-39

Week 6 – Selfhood, Origins, Memory, Consciousness

Wednesday 9 March:

Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time* (selection)

Jean Starobinski, "The Style of Autobiography"

Friday 11 March:

Clarice Lispector, *Agua Viva* (selection)

Week 7 – Self-Narrative and Psychoanalysis

Wednesday 16 March and Friday 18 March:

Italo Svevo, *Zeno's Conscience* (selection)

Suggested extra reading: S. Freud, "The Rat Man"

Week 8 – Modernism, (Auto)biography and the Novel I

Wednesday 23 March:

Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past", in *Moments of Being*

Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography"

Friday 25 March:

WRITTEN EXAM

Week 9 – The Politics of Life-Writing I

Wednesday 30 March:

Judith Butler, "Giving an Account of Oneself"

Adriana Cavarero, "The Necessary Other", in *Relating Narratives. Storytelling and Selfhood*

Friday 1 April:

Felicity Nussbaum, "The Politics of Subjectivity and the Ideology of Genre"

Week 10 – The Politics of Life-Writing II

Wednesday 6 April and Friday 8 April:

Audre Lorde, *Zami. A New Spelling of My Name. A Biomythography* (selection)

SPRING BREAK: 11 APRIL- 18 APRIL

Week 11 - The Personal Essay

Wednesday 20 April:

Joan Didion, *The White Album* (selection)

Friday 22 April:

Jia Tolentino, *Trick Mirror. Reflections on Self-Delusion* (selection)

Weeks 12-13 – Autobiography/Autofiction, personal and collective

Wednesday 27 April and Friday 29 April:

Annie Ernaux, *The Years* (selection)

Recommended extra reading: Luisa Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation. Italy, 1968* (selection)

Wednesday 4 May and Friday 6 May:

Lorna Goodison, *From Harvey River. A Memoir of My Mother and Her Island* (selection)

Weeks 14 – Open week

Wednesday 11 May and Friday 13 May:

Texts to be decided

FINAL ESSAY deadline: Sunday 15 May, 23:59 hr