

LT224 – FORMS OF LIFE-WRITING: FROM CONFESSION TO PERSONAL ESSAY

Seminar Leader: Laura Scuriatti
Course time: 10:45 am – 12:15 pm
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Office Hours: 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

Students are required to attend all classes, to come to class prepared and with the relevant materials and textbooks. Participation consists in contributing productively to class discussion in a respectful manner, and in demonstrating a sound knowledge of the texts assigned.

Please note that in seminars we will work on printed texts: NO COMPUTERS OR TABLETS allowed in class. Texts which are made available in digital format should be printed for use in class.

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

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.

The use of AI to write assignments is prohibited and will be considered a breach of academic integrity.

Accommodations

Bard College Berlin is committed to inclusion and providing equal access to all students; we uphold and maintain all aspects of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 3 of the German Disability Equality Act of November 27, 2002 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1468). If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, Atticus Kleen, (accommodations@berlin.bard.edu) to request an official accommodation.

Requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible to ensure adequate time for coordination and planning. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and may require advance notice to implement.

If you have already been approved for accommodations with the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, please arrange to meet with me outside of class so that we can develop an implementation plan.

Students may face extenuating circumstances related to various personal or external factors, which impact their academic performance. While these circumstances often do not fall within the legal framework of Disability Accommodations, Bard College Berlin is committed to supporting students experiencing such circumstances. A student needing a short extension or a replacement assignment because of an extenuating circumstance is encouraged to make arrangements directly with instructors if possible. If further support is needed, please visit the [Bard College Berlin Accessibility page](#). Questions about this process can be directed to James Harker (j.harker@berlin.bard.edu) or Maria Anderson-Long (m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu).

Attendance

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

ABSENCES ON EXAM DAYS, UNLESS CAUSED BY A DOCUMENTED SUDDEN ILLNESS WILL RESULT IN FAILING THE EXAM.

Bard College Berlin may 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.

Assessment

Students are required to attend all classes, to come to class prepared and with the relevant materials and textbooks. Participation consists in contributing productively to class discussion in a respectful manner, in demonstrating a sound knowledge of the texts assigned.

Assignments

Assignments for this course consist in:

- 2 in-class exams on 28 October and 2 December (circa 1500 words each)
- 1 presentation on chosen assigned texts: max 20 minutes. Students should submit their presentation notes after delivering the presentation (circa 1500 words).
- 1 response paper on a chosen text (circa 1000 words) to be submitted BEFORE the text is discussed in class

All assignments must be completed in order to pass the course. Should a student be sick during the exam day or on the day of their scheduled presentations, it will be possible to schedule an alternative date for the missed assignment, provided official documentation is submitted, confirming the inability to attend class.

An unexcused absence on the day of the assigned presentation or exam will result in a F for that assignment.

DEADLINE FOR SIGNING-UP FOR PRESENTATIONS AND RESPONSE PAPER: WEDNESDAY 17 SEPTEMBER.

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 a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed upon by both parties. 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%

In-class exams: 20% each

Presentation: 15%

Response paper: 15%

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.

Tuesday 2 September:

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

Thursday 4 September:

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*

Tuesday 9 September:

Augustine, *Confessions*, Books I-II and VIII

Thursday 11 September:

Augustine, *Confessions*, Book X

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

Week 3 – Fragments of Autobiography: Michel de Montaigne

Tuesday 16 September:

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

WEDNESDAY 17 SEPTEMBER: DEADLINE FOR SIGNING UP FOR PRESENTATIONS AND RESPONSE PAPERS

Thursday 18 September:

Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, Book I: Essay 21 "On the Power of Imagination", Essay 55 "On Smells"; Book II: Essay 1 "On the Inconstancy of Our Actions"

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

Tuesday 23 September:

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions* (selection)

Thursday 25 September:

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

From OED (Oxford English Dictionary): definitions of "self", "subject", "person", "identity"

Week 5 – Theories on Selfhood and Person

Tuesday 30 September:

John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (selection)

David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (selection)

Thursday 2 October:

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

Week 6 – Selfhood, Origins, Memory, Consciousness

Tuesday 7 October:

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

Thursday 9 October:

Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva* (selection)

Week 7 – Self-Narrative and Psychoanalysis - Italo Svevo, *Zeno's Conscience*

Tuesday 14 October

Readings:

Italo Svevo, *Zeno's Conscience*, pp. 3-30 ("Preface" and "Smoke").

Thursday 16 October:

Italo Svevo, *Zeno's Conscience*, pp. 61-155 and pp. 402-437 ("The Story of My Marriage" and "Psychoanalysis").

FALL BREAK: 20 OCTOBER – 26 OCTOBER

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

Tuesday 28 October: IN-CLASS EXAM

Thursday 30 October:

Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography"

Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (selection)

Recommended extra reading: André Maurois, *Aspects of Biography* (selection)

Week 9 – The Politics of Life-Writing I

Tuesday 4 November:

Michel Foucault, "What is an Author"?

Jean Starobinski, "The Style of Autobiography"

Thursday 6 November:

Judith Butler, "Giving an Account of Oneself"

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

Week 10 – The Politics of Life-Writing II - Audre Lorde, *Zami. A New Spelling of My Name*

Tuesday 11 November:

Audre Lorde, *Zami. A New Spelling of My Name. A Biomythography*, pp. 1-64 (chapters 1-7)

Thursday 13 November:

Audre Lorde, *Zami. A New Spelling of My Name. A Biomythography*, pp. 98-118, pp. 207-215 and pp. 270-304 (chapters 13-14, 23 and 30-end including epilogue).

Week 11 – The Personal Essay

Tuesday 18 November

Joan Didion, *Were I was From and South and West* (selection)

Thursday 20 November:

Jia Tolentino, “The I in the Internet”, from *Trick Mirror. Reflections on Self-Delusion*, pp. 3-33.

Week 12 – Autobiography/Autofiction, personal and collective

Tuesday 25 November

Annie Ernaux, *The Years*, pp. 1-57, pp. 83-115.

Thursday 27 November:

Annie Ernaux, *The Years*, pp. 127-151, pp. 186-201, pp. 206-end.

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

Week 13 – Life Writing and its Discontent

Tuesday 2 December - IN-CLASS EXAM

Thursday 4 December:

Marie Darrieussecq, “Fiction in the First Person, or Immoral Writing”

Zadie Smith, “The I Who is not Me” and “Life-writing”

Weeks 14 – Contemporary experiments

Tuesday 9 December EVENING EVENT - Guest lecture: James Harker Time TBD

Readings: Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (selection)

Thursday 11 December:

Helen MacDonald, *Vesper Flights* (selection)

December 15 – 19 - COMPLETION WEEK