

HUMS 614: Personalizing History

Summer 2011: 08/08/2011 - 08/12/2011

Special Schedule: One-week immersion, August 8-12 (Monday-Friday)

9:00 am to 5:00 pm

seminar room, 285 Court Street

Professor Indira Karamcheti

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Hours: 08/08/2011-08/12/2011, 12-1

DESCRIPTION: How much are we shaped by our historical times and places? How much power do we have to make our historical conditions respond to our needs and desires? These are the questions at the foundation of this course. We will examine these questions and others in the literary genre of the immigrant memoir, where they are particularly crucial. The course includes both memoir-writing and memoir-reading. We will construct narratives about our times and selves in a series of writing workshops. There will be some exercises where you will be asked to research specific aspects of your times and places. For example, you might be asked to research and write about such questions as: when and where were you born, what were the major cultural or political currents of that time, and how was your early childhood influenced by them? Or you may be asked to bring in a photograph of someone important in your personal history and write about that person.

immigrant memoirs are a distinct genre, with topics/themes that are particular to it. Some of the most important issues are: place and displacement, language, loss/trauma/melancholia/nostalgia, self-invention or transformation, family, and the idea of "America." The class will engage with these topics in the analysis of the readings from our text, and also in the writing of memoirs. Specific techniques will be highlighted for writing practice: the catalogue, diction, dialogue, metaphor, description, point of view, and narrative structure, including temporal organization, the doubled narrative, and the narrative frame. Because the course is, in addition to the introduction of a literary genre, a memoir writing workshop, each day will include timed writing from a given prompt, and group critique of individual work. The instructor will meet once with each student for an individual conference.

REQUIRED TEXT: *Becoming Americans: Four Centuries of Immigrant Writing*, ed. Ilan Stavans

REQUIREMENTS: Daily attendance, active participation in class activities and discussion, written work as assigned in class and two memoiristic essays (one due the first day of class, the second on Monday, Aug. 15 by email).

SYLLABUS: Bring with you all the writing you do for the course-- prompts, drafts, exercises-- to each class meeting. Please do all the readings assigned before the course begins. We will not discuss all of them in class; rather, the instructor will choose which to discuss, and students will be asked to raise relevant points drawn from the other readings. You should read them critically, thinking of what the writers say, and how they achieve their effects. Lastly, the last hour of each class (4-5) will be reserved for individual conferences of 20 minutes each. They will be scheduled in alphabetical order, as will class critiques.

Monday, Aug. 8: ESSAY # 1 DUE IN CLASS, 1-2 PAGES. This essay will be collected as soon as the class begins, at 9 a.m.

Introduction and definition of terms

Topics: Place, loss/trauma/melancholia/nostalgia

Techniques: description, the catalogue

Readings: Kemble, p. 54
Cohan, p. 109
Rolvaag, p. 144
McKay, "Tropics," p. 205
Said, p. 378
Alvarez, p. 426
Naficy, p. 62

Tuesday, Aug. 9: BRING A PHOTOGRAPH OF FAMILY, WITH OR WITHOUT YOU IN IT, TO CLASS

Topics: family, food

Techniques: point-of-view: naive, unreliable, omniscient, shifting/multiple, 1st, 2nd, 3rd person; dialogue

Readings: Yeziarsky, p. 156
McCourt, p. 369
Sante, p. 436
Lagnado, p. 445
Rodriguez, p. 684

Wednesday, Aug. 10: WRITE ONE-PAGE OF DIALOGUE BETWEEN TWO PEOPLE THAT YOU REMEMBER HEARING OR PARTICIPATING IN; BRING IT TO CLASS

Topic: language

Techniques: metaphor; diction (high, low, colloquial, slang), orality and writing (transcription of dialect, accent, regionality, race, ethnicity, gender, class)

Readings: Djerassi, p. 304
Dorfman, p. 350
Levertov, p. 367
Djanikian, p. 394
Arana, p. 414
Hoffman, p. 464
Danticat, p. 607

Thursday, Aug. 11:

Topics: self-invention/transformation; education

Techniques: Structure I (temporal organizations, doubled and frame narratives)

Readings: Antin, p. 129
Perloff, p. 290
Lee, p. 469
Geok-Lin Lim, p. 485
Stavans, p. 629
Vapnyar, p. 675

Friday, Aug. 12:

Topics: the idea of "America" and "American" identity

Techniques: Structure II (Freytag's Pyramid, open and closed/resolved and unresolved)

Readings: Crèvecoeur, p. 34
Schurz, p. 80
Menotti, p. 166
Galarza, p. 188
McKay, "America," p. 206
Adamic, p. 207
Fermi, p. 313
Milosz, p. 432

FINAL ESSAY: 4-5 pages, due to me (ikaramcheti@wesleyan.edu) by email by noon on Monday, Aug. 15

Essay # 1, 1-2 pages, due in class on Aug. 8

Please choose one of the following topics for your essay. Whichever topic you choose, make sure that you give specific material facts: the who, what, where, when, how, why--or, at least--as much as you can. The material facts are not enough: you must also tell the reader what it means. What is the reader to understand from what you have said? This is the "so what?" of a successful piece of memoir writing.

1. What material, external, historical event, era, or cultural movement has had the most important influence in shaping, not your personality, but the course of your life? For example, race, gender, and class are crucial in determining the kinds of lives we have. Immigration has been a crucial determining event for many in our readings. Growing up in a peripatetic army family also shapes the course of one's life. 9/11 changed lives drastically, both inside and outside the U.S. Choose one external matter that has determined your life in an important way, and explain as specifically as you can.

2. The cliché says that America is a nation of immigrants. When, from where, and to where did your family immigrate? How has that fact of immigration shaped your family and you specifically? Give details and examples. Is there a family story that shows the influence of immigration?

3. "Baby boomers" are understood to have been shaped by the circumstances of their having been born in large numbers during the period of U.S. post-World War II affluence. There are names for other historical cohorts of our population: the "Gen X-ers," for instance, or the "Lost Generation." How would you name your generation? What influences, historical and cultural, have shaped its--and your--identity? Do you have specific memories of that era or generation that you can relate to support your claims?

4. During what years were you a child--say, between seven and ten years old? Research the important public events that occurred during that time (a quick internet search would be enough for this purpose). What do you remember of that same time period? How do

your memories interweave with or contradict with that public history? Give specifics.

Essay # 2, 4-5 pages of memoir plus 1 page of analysis of that memoir, due to me by email (ikaramcheti@wesleyan.edu) by noon on Aug. 15

Please choose one of the following topics for your essay. Whichever topic you choose, make sure that you give specific material facts: the who, what, where, when, how, why--or, at least--as much as you can. The material facts are not enough: you must also tell the reader what it means. What is the reader to understand from what you have said? This is the "so what?" of a successful piece of memoir writing.

Because this is the final project for the course, I would like to see your mastery of the various writing techniques and the various themes of the immigrant genre that we have discussed. You do not need to try to use all of them, but use those you think most appropriate for what you wish to write. In the 1 page of analysis that will accompany your memoir (you should clearly label this separate sheet "ANALYSIS"), tell me what techniques you have used, what themes/topics you found cropping up in your own memoir. Where did you use these techniques? for what reasons? What topics/themes? Where can the reader see them in your memoir?

1. You may invent your own topic for this final essay--with this condition: you must run it by me by the end of class on Friday. If I do not give you the okay, I will not accept the essay on submission.
2. You may return to the topics of essay # 1, and either write again on the topic you already wrote on, or choose another one. This essay may incorporate your original essay # 1 if you wish, but this essay # 2 should be substantially different and more developed, using what we have been discussing and working on all week.
3. The purpose of the timed prompts is to generate material for later use by you. Choose one of the prompts you've written for the class or ideas that arose out of it and develop it/them into a full memoir. If you depart from the actual prompt as given by me, you must run it by me.