

Personalizing History
AMST 245/ENGL 246
Professor Indira Karamcheti
Jan. 6-Jan. 19, 10-12 and 2-5
CAMS 3 (Center for the Americas)
Office: CAMS 205, Hours: 1-2 and by appointment, X3625

COURSE 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 questions and others are at the foundation of our class, which 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.

The memoir is a distinct genre, with topics/themes particular to it. Some of the most important are memory itself, childhood, place and displacement, language, loss/trauma/melancholia/nostalgia, self-invention or transformation, family and generational differences. The class will engage with these topics in the analysis of the readings and also in the writing of memoirs. Specific techniques will be highlighted for writing practice: the catalog, diction, dialogue, metaphor, description, point of view, and narrative structure, including temporal organization, the doubled narrative, and the frame narrative.

TEXTS:

The following will be available through Broad Street Books. We will also be reading some selected articles and shorter pieces, indicated with an asterisk (*), which I will make available later.

Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis*

Bechdel, Alison, *Fun Home*

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

REQUIREMENTS: Faithful attendance, engaged participation, and timely completion of all readings and assignments. All readings should be completed by the time classes begin, and one writing assignment will be due on the first day of classes. We will be doing in-class writing each day, and will analyze readings with a view to both technique and ideas. Two short essays of 3-4 pages and one final paper of 5-6 pages. Every student will have one or more pieces (depending on the number of students enrolled) workshoped in class. Each student will have an individual critique with the professor.

SCHEDULE OF READINGS AND ASSIGNMENTS:

Wed., Jan. 6: Introduction

Essay # 1 due in class, 3-4 pages: To the best of your recollection, what is the earliest thing you can remember? Describe it as carefully and as completely as you can, so that the reader can see it as clearly as you can. Then go a step further—what does that memory make you think or feel?

We will discuss *Fun Home*—please have it read when you come to class; consider the following:

The relationship between the drawings and the words

The actual house, what it looks like, and what it means to the narrator

Do you, the reader, know more, or something different, than the narrator does?

Thurs., Jan. 7: *Fun Home*, con't.

Read Shammas, "Amérka, Amérka"* and Raban, "Hunting Mr. Heartbreak"*

We will discuss description, including the technique of the catalogue, and point of view (unreliable narrator, 1st and 3rd person, and omniscient/partially omniscient narrators)

Fri., Jan. 8: *Persepolis*

Read O'Brien, "Suburbs"*

Mon., Jan. 11: *Persepolis* con't.

Read Rodriguez, "Aria" from *The Hunger of Memory** and Ali, "Snow on the Desert"*

Essay # 2, due in class, 3-4 pages: research the important events of the year of your birth. What was going on in the world when you were born? Look at politics, economics, and culture, including social issues and movements in the areas of movies, music, personalities, art, sports, etc. In what ways was your world then and your world now informed by those events?

Tues., Jan. 12: *Between the World and Me*

Wed., Jan. 13: Read Cha, from *Dictée** and Didion, from *The White Album**

Bring a photograph of you with or without your family to class

Thurs., Jan. 14: *The Fire Next Time*

Fri., Jan. 15: Read Berry, from *A Native Hill** and Ehrlich, "The Solace of Open Spaces"*

Tues., Jan. 19: Final due