

Winter 2021

ENG 205: Life-writing/Autobiography

Professor Southworth

Office Hours: Mon/Wed 11:30-1:00 and by appointment

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### Course Description:

Our focus for the class will be autobiography. We'll read six autobiographical works by British and American writers of the Modernist period (1890-1945). We'll use our readings of these fascinating works to build our understanding of the genre.

What is at stake when one attempts to remember and record one's life? To what kinds of vulnerabilities is the writer subject? How does memory function in terms of the exercise of autobiography? What common features do these attempts at auto-portraiture have? Where do the texts diverge and innovate? What strategies do our writers deploy to overcome some of the difficulties inherent in autobiographical writing? How does autobiography complicate the distinction between fiction and non-fiction?

Themes and things to consider when reading will include representations of space and time, continuity vs gaps in the narrative, travel (a number of these writers converged on Paris/France), notions of home and away, the relationship between the individual and the community, writing from the margins, childhood, nostalgia, storytelling, witnessing, the role of reading, books, education, humour and much more . . . Readings will be supplemented by lectures and films (including the recent film *I Am Not Your Negro*).

Our selection includes three of the best known African American writers of the Modernist period, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, and four of the most important women writers of the period: as well as Hurston, Gertrude Stein from the US, Jean Rhys from the Caribbean/UK and Virginia Woolf from the UK. With this in mind, we'll consider what is unique to writing Black lives and women's lives, and also what it means to write from the margins.

### Required Reading:

Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*

Jean Rhys' *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography*

Virginia Woolf's *Moments of Being*

James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*

Langston Hughes' *The Big Sea*

Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (available as an ebook at the library and on canvas).

**Class Requirements/Grading:** A final grade of C or better for the course is required for English major credit. No incompletes will be granted, except in case of documented emergency.

Participation (including attendance and occasional reading quizzes/in-class writing exercises)	20%
Midterm Exam (week six)	40%
Final Project (short paper of 6-7 pages or a digital exhibit)	40%

**Course Objectives/Learning Outcomes:**

1. Improve reading, writing and analytical skills.
2. Consider forms of life-writing, and specifically autobiography. Understand the formal and thematic conventions, as well as the history, of the genre.
3. Focus on African-American and women's life-writing.
4. Develop self-direction and initiative.
5. Nourish creativity.

**Daily Reading Assignments:** Read each assignment before class. Read all texts slowly and carefully.

**Exam:** The in-class Midterm Exam covers the first half of the course. It will consist of short answer and multiple-choice questions and a close reading essay based on key passages from the course texts (40% of final grade). You may use your exam answers as a starting point for the final paper.

**Final Paper:** You will write one paper: a 6-7 page analytical paper. Topics should be discussed with me in advance. I encourage you to make an appointment to see me with a written first draft of 2 pages in hand around midterm. All papers must be titled. You should proofread carefully; spelling, punctuation, and grammar count. As an alternative to the conventional paper, you will create a digital exhibit based on course materials, conceived in discussion with me. The digital exhibit will be accompanied by a three-page analytical statement of purpose.

Late papers/projects lose 1 step per day (A to A-, B+ to B, C to C-, etc.) including weekends/holidays. After a week, late papers will not be accepted; they will count as missed assignments (F).

**Writing Associates:** The Writing Associates Program offers free, one-on-one peer tutoring for students in 100- and 200-level English and Composition classes. Writing Associate tutors are advanced English majors who have been trained to tutor writing. They are available to help students with any aspect of their writing for this course, from learning how to write about literature and media to crafting clearer and more effective arguments. To make an appointment with a Writing Associate, go to <https://writingassociates.uoregon.edu>.

## READING SCHEDULE:

### Week One:

- Monday: Introductions/review of syllabus/housekeeping/questions.
- Wednesday: Read Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* (Chapters 1-2)  
Watch Hurston footage: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtPrN-zYZc4>
- Friday: Hurston (Chapters 3-4)  
Read Trudier Harris' chapter on African American Autobiography (on canvas):

### Week Two:

- Monday: Hurston (Chapters 5-11)  
Discussion of Smith & Watson's "Tool Kit" (on canvas).  
  
Recommended: listen to Alice Walker's: "Zora Neale Hurston and the People She Looked at Very Hard and Loved Very Much"  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUyOQ3DpqzM>
- Wednesday: Hurston (Chapters 12-14)
- Friday: Conclude Hurston (Chapters 15-16 and appendices).

### Week Three:

- Monday: MLK Day Holiday.
- Wednesday: Jean Rhys' "Smile Please" in *Smile Please* (pp. 1-79)
- Friday: Rhys' "It Began to Grow Cold" (pp. 81-157).

### Week Four:

- Monday: Rhys autobiographical short stories (extracts on canvas).  
Recommended: Watch "Paris was a Woman" (online)
- Wednesday: Read James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* (pp. 3-9 and 87-115).
- Friday: Baldwin (pp.59-86)

### Week Five

Monday: Baldwin (pp.141-179)  
Recommended: Watch Baldwin's Cambridge Union debate with William F.Buckley (1965)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Tek9h3a5wQ>

Wednesday: Watch *I am not your Negro* (on Kanopy).

Friday: Discussion of Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*  
[https://www.democracynow.org/2015/11/27/between\\_the\\_world\\_and\\_me\\_ta](https://www.democracynow.org/2015/11/27/between_the_world_and_me_ta)

### **Week Six**

Monday: Midterm Exam.

Wednesday: Virginia Woolf's "Moments of Being" (pp. TBD)

Friday: More Woolf (pp. TBD).  
Recommended: Watch *The Hours*.

### **Week Seven**

Monday: Woolf extracts from *Letters and Diaries* (on canvas).

Monday: Langston Hughes' *The Big Sea* (Part I "Twenty-One"; pp.1-100)

Wednesday: Hughes (Part II "Big Sea"; pp. 101-222)

Friday: Hughes. (Part III "Black Renaissance"; pp. 223-334)

### **Week Eight:**

Monday: Library workshop./Finish up Hughes discussion.

Wednesday: Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B.Toklas* (Chapters 1-2)

Friday: More Stein (Chapters 3-4)

### **Week Nine**

Monday: Stein (chapter 5-6)

Wednesday: Complete Stein (chapter 7) We'll read together a few extracts from Melanie Micir's *The Passion Projects* (on canvas)

Friday: Watch: Agnès Varda's *Les Plages d'Agnès* or Marjane Sartrapi's *Persepolis*.

**Week Ten:** Our last week will be dedicated to working on final projects

Monday:

Wednesday:

Friday:

Final projects due on the Friday of finals week. No final exam.

**Incomplete Policy:** Undergraduate students have one calendar year to make up an incomplete mark assigned by a UO faculty member. Failure to make up the incomplete at the end of one calendar year will result in the mark of "I" automatically changing to a grade of "F" or "N." No incompletes will be granted, except in case of medical or personal emergency.

**Students Needing Accommodation:** UO strives to create inclusive learning environments. If you have a documented disability and anticipate needing accommodations, please notify me and the Accessible Education Center (164 Oregon Hall; <http://aec.uoregon.edu>), so we can make appropriate arrangements.

**Use of Electronic Devices.** Laptops and tablets for taking notes are permitted, but cell-phone use during class is forbidden. Texting or surfing the web during class time is distracting and disrespectful to your instructor and classmates. Students who violate this policy will be asked to leave class and marked as "absent (unexcused)"; final grades will be impacted negatively.

**Academic Integrity:** Academic dishonesty is not tolerated in this course or at this university. All work submitted must be your own and written for this course. The use of sources—ideas, quotations, paraphrases; from papers, articles, books, or websites—must be properly acknowledged and documented. If you have any doubts or questions about plagiarism or the University's policy on it, go to: <http://policies.uoregon.edu/vol-3-administration-student-affairs/ch-1-conduct/student-conduct-code>. In accordance with English Department policy, cases of clearly established plagiarism or cheating will result in a final course grade of "F," and all incidents will be reported to the Office of Student Conduct. In cases of a second offense, plagiarism or cheating can result in dismissal from the University.

**Inclement Weather.** In the event of inclement weather, a banner will appear on the UO homepage displaying information about delay, cancellation or closure decisions for the Eugene campus. The latest updates and bulletins will be here: <https://alerts.uoregon.edu/>. Local television and radio stations will also broadcast delay and cancellation information. I will use canvas to

communicate information specific to the course. For more information on UO inclement weather policies go to: <https://hr.uoregon.edu/about-hr/campus-notifications/inclement-weather>