

Life History Narratives in the U.S. – 20th Century

History 600

Fall 2005

Professor: Cindy I-Fen Cheng
Office: 5106 Mosse Humanities Building
Office Hours: TR 11am – noon; and By Appointment
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Class Meetings: T 1:20-3:20pm; 2619 Humanities

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Ever become intrigued by the Olympic gymnastic competitions after you learned about the backgrounds and life histories of the gymnasts? Or felt that there was more at stake with a basketball game having kept up with the drama that had been occurring off-court? Are you a fan of the *Newlyweds*, the *Osbornes*, *American Idol*, the *Apprentice*, the *Amazing Race*, *Survivor*, *Simple Life*, *Court TV*, *VH-1 Behind the Music*, *MTV Diaries*, *ESPN Behind the Glory*, and/or *Lifetime's* “based on a true story” series? Looking forward to the upcoming *Britney TV*? Are you a “blogger”? You Xanga? Or are you someone who doesn't quite “get” the popularity of reality-based TV and the proliferation of auto/biographical sketches on TV and the internet?

This class is designed in part to have a conversation around these questions. Specifically, it examines society's fascination with documenting and consuming lived experiences, especially those experiences that appear unscripted and “live.” While TV and the internet have become for many the most popular mediums to access life stories, this course focuses on the academic disciplines of English, Anthropology, and, of course, History and their active use and production of personal experiences. Just as the inquiry into why and how we know what we know about Jessica Simpson requires us to examine the influence of advertisers over TV programming and the need for MTV to keep ratings up, we will also look into the values and “economies” that govern the writing of autobiographies, ethnographies and oral histories. More importantly, we will consider why in the corporate infrastructure of MTV it makes sense that a “blonde airhead” would be the main object of interest while in the academic fields of the Humanities and Social Sciences, life histories on women, ethnic and racial minorities, and the primitive dominate research. By asking these questions we, as a class, will develop what it means to **historicize** life histories, namely 1) whose life stories do we want to know about and why 2) what kinds of stories do we want to tell or consume and which stories are kept marginal and 3) how does the use and production of life histories in academic research tell us more about the world we live in. In this class we will read examples of auto/biographies, ethnographies, and oral histories along with articles that deal with the writing of lived experiences. We will also be viewing and critically examining films that seek to document lived experiences. Each week students will be

required to turn in a Critical Thinking Paper that examines the issues addressed in the assigned readings and/or films.

This class also contains a “hands on” approach to life histories where students by the end of the semester will write a research paper based on an interview that they have conducted. To help prepare in the writing of this research paper, students at the beginning of semester are required to write a statement detailing their research topic and produce a list of bibliographic sources. Students will also turn in a copy of the transcribed for review along a working draft of their paper. These drafts will be subjected to peer reviews. There will be three one-on-one meetings with the Professor. At the end of the semester, each student will present his/her research before the class.

*** Any student who feels that he or she may need special accommodation due to a disability should contact me privately. Please also contact the Mcburney Disability Resource Center (<http://www.mcburney.wisc.edu/>) at 608-263-2741 (phone); 263-6393 (TTY); 263-2998 (FAX); FrontDesk@mcb.wisc.edu to ensure that such accommodations are implemented in a timely fashion.*

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING

• Class Participation	40%	400 points
○ Weekly Critical Thinking Papers (270)		
○ Meetings with Professor (30)		
○ Attendance and Class Discussion (100)		
• Research and Presentation	30%	300 points
○ Statement of research project (50) with bibliographic sources		
○ Transcription of Interview (100)		
○ First Draft of Paper (100)		
○ Paper Presentation (50)		
• Final Paper	30%	300 points
TOTAL	100%	1000 points

COURSE POLICIES

Regular and prompt attendance, active participation, and mature attentiveness during seminar sessions are mandatory. The professor will not distribute lecture or discussion notes via e-mail for students who miss seminar sessions nor will lecture or discussion notes be posted on the course webpage. There are no excused absences.

Assignments are always due during the first ten minutes of class. Any assignment received after the first ten minutes of class on the due date is considered late and will not be evaluated or credited. No late work will be accepted, with no exception. No incompletes will be granted for the course except in cases of personal emergencies, subject to the discretion of the professor. Students are responsible for retaining a copy of all assignments.

Please read the university policy on plagiarism. All information borrowed from print sources or the internet must be clearly identified and properly credited. Any instance of plagiarism or cheating on exams or quizzes will result in an “F” grade for the assignment and the course.

This course is open to a variety of ways of interpreting life history narratives and students are encouraged to share their readings and analysis of assigned texts. Since there will be differences and disagreements, students are expected to show respect to the comments and positions of the professor and your fellow students.

Each student is warmly encouraged to meet with the professor during office hours and by appointment.

REQUIRED TEXTS

- **COURSE READER** ® available at the Humanities Copy Center; Located at 1650 Humanities; Hours: 7:45 - 11:45am, 12:30 - 4:10pm ; Phone: 263-3718 or 263-1803
- **FULL LENGTH TEXTS** available at the Rainbow Bookstore Cooperative; Located at 426 West Gilman Street; Hours: MWF 10-6, TR 10-8, Sat. 10- 6, Sun 12-5; Phone: 257-6050
 1. Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*
 2. Mine Okubo, *Citizen 13660*
 3. Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History*
 4. Lillian Faderman, *I Begin My Life All Over: The Hmong and the American Immigrant Experience*
 5. Mary Paik Lee, *Quiet Odyssey: A Pioneer Korean Woman in America*

A copy of the COURSE READER along with all assigned FULL LENGTH TEXTS are on reserve at the College Library.

FILMS

- *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*
- *Aka Don Bonus*
- *History and Memory*
- *Maya Lin: A Clear Strong Vision*
- *The Split Horn*

COURSE SCHEDULE

T 9.6 Introduction – Contexts and Disciplines

Readings:

- “How To” from The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Southern History Program <http://www.sohp.org/howto/index.html> ®

- Ritchie, Donald A., “Conducting Interviews” in *Doing Oral History* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 57-83. ®
- Finnegan, Ruth, “Texts in Process: Translation, Transcription, and Presentation” in *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts* (London: Routledge, 1992), 186-199. ®

Ethnography

T 9.13 “Culture” as Object of Description and Critique; Self/Other

Readings:

- Marcus, George E. and Michael M.J. Fischer, “Ethnography and Interpretive Anthropology” in *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 17-44. ®
- Said, Edward W. “Introduction”; “Knowing the Oriental”; “Imaginative Geography and Its Representations” in *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 1-9; 31-73. ®

DUE – Critical Thinking Paper #1

T 9.20 Location and the “Insider”

Film: *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, pt.1

Readings:

- Vo, Linda Trinh, “Performing Ethnography in Asian American Communities: Beyond the Insider-versus-Outsider Perspective” in *Ethnographic Explorations of Asian America* edited by Martin F. Manalansan IV (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 17-37. ®
- Lal, Jayati, “Situating Locations” in *Feminist Approaches to Theory and Methodology* edited by Sharlene Hesse-Biber, et al (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999)101-135. ®
- Manalansan, Martin F., “Speaking in Transit”; “Out There” in *Global Divas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 45-88. ®

DUE – Critical Thinking Paper #2

T 9.27 Documenting Lives

Film: *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, pt.2

Readings:

- Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson, “Life Narrative in Historical Perspective”; “Autographical ‘I’” in *Reading Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 83-109; 58-71. ®
- Neuman, Shirley, “Autobiography: From Different Poetics to a Poetics of Differences” in *Essays on Life Writing* edited by Marlene Kadar (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 213-230. ®

DUE – Critical Thinking Paper #3

Autobiography

T 10.4 The “I” of Autobiography

Film: *aka Don Bonus*

Readings:

- *Zami*, Intro - chapter 17.

DUE – Statement of Research Project with Bibliographic Sources & Human Subjects Tutorial

<http://info.gradsch.wisc.edu/research/compliance/humansubjects/tutorial/index.htm>

T 10.11 **Difference and the Self**

Readings:

- *Zami*, chapter 18-Epilogue.

DUE – Critical Thinking Paper #4

T 10.18 **Shifting Positions of Narration and Identification**

Readings:

- *Citizen 13660*

DUE – Critical Thinking Paper #5

Oral History

T 10.25 **Methodology**

Film: *History and Memory*

Readings:

- Portelli, Alessandro, “Introduction”; “On Methodology” in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), 1-76. ®
- Scott, Joan W., ““Experience”” in *Feminist Theorize the Political* edited by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 22-40. ®

DUE – Critical Thinking Paper #6

T 11.1 **Methodology**

Readings:

- *Narrating Our Pasts*

DUE - Critical Thinking Paper #7

T 11.8 **Giving Voice vs. Consuming Difference**

Readings:

- Gee, Emma, “Issei Women” in *Counterpoint* edited by Emmy Gee (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1976), 359-364. ®
- Yung, Judy, “Giving Voice to Chinese American Women” in *Women’s Oral History* edited by Susan H. Armitage et. al (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 87-111. ®
- hooks, bell, “Eating the Other” in *Feminist Approaches to Theory and Methodology* edited by Sharlene Hesse-Biber et.al (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 179-194. ®

DUE – Transcription of Interview

T 11.15 Structure and Form

Film: *Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision*

Readings:

- Kibria, Nazli, "Patchworking" in *Family Tightrope* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 73-107. ®
- Freeman, James M., "Hearts of Sorrow"; "America: Heartache Beneath Success" in *Hearts of Sorrow* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 1-24; 353-368; 376-381; 414-423. ®
- Chan, Sucheng, editor, "Introduction"; "Samkhann Khoeun" in *Not Just Victims* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 1-43; 127-156. ®

DUE – Critical Thinking Paper #8

T 11.22 Structure and Form

Readings:

- *I Begin My Life All Over*

DUE – Critically Thinking Paper #9

T 11.29 Structure and Form

Film: *The Split Horn*

Readings:

- *Quiet Odyssey*

DUE – First Draft of Research Paper

T 12.6 Structure and Form

Readings:

- *Quiet Odyssey*

DUE - Peer Reviews

T 12.13 In-Class Presentation

T 12.20 Final Paper Due – 10 am