



MARCHUTZ SCHOOL OF FINE ARTS

ART 370

3 credits (45 contact hours)

CREATIVE NONFICTION WRITING AND THE INTERCULTURAL EXPERIENCE

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The creative writing process and studying abroad have much in common -- both require reflection and critical analysis in order to realize their fullest potential. Lyrical sentences, vividly rendered images, or even the most interesting set of anecdotes in the world won't take the reader far if the writer doesn't lend shape and meaning to the material. The same is true for studying and living abroad. In this class, we will focus on an intensive writing practice and we will deconstruct and explicate various elements of the essay, beginning with Montaigne through more modern iterations of the essay (particularly those oriented toward exploring a "new" culture and "self" within an intercultural context). Furthermore, we will look at how our beliefs and perspectives inform our thinking and writing, and how living within another culture challenges those viewpoints and processes as writers.

Here before me now is my picture, my map, of a place and therefore of myself ... just as much of its reality is based on my own shadows, my inventions. -- M.F.K. Fisher, Two Towns in Provence

What happened to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the larger sense the writer is able to make of what happened. -- Vivian Gornick, American essayist and critic

Writing as a mode of learning is ... essentially a philosophical point of departure for investigating the world. However, living in a different society will demonstrate that a personal view of the world is not always a sufficient frame of reference for interpreting experience. Writing is where the thinking begins. -- Writing Across Culture

I write to find out what I know. -- Patricia Hampl, American essayist and poet

COURSE OBJECTIVES

Our paramount focus will be on how to improve our writing by pushing ourselves to think critically on the page about the material (we will look to find the "Story" in the "Situation" per Vivian Gornick). We will also examine the ways in which the writing process and cross-cultural experiences are parallel endeavors that can serve to inform and answer each other.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Students will be able to identify and effectively employ various narrative strategies, structures and forms related to their creative writing.

- Students will be able to transform descriptive writing into literary nonfiction stories that embody meaning and render fresh insight.
- Students will be able to use an aesthetic vocabulary to critique literary works.
- Students will demonstrate an increasingly nuanced analysis of aspects of their own personal cross-cultural study abroad experience as well as of French and American culture through the arc of their own literary essays.
- Students will become increasingly adept with the workshop process of self and group analysis and critique.

INSTRUCTIONAL METHODS AND ACTIVITIES

Requirements:

- A. Image Notebook: “Three Things” (to be explained in class). This will be collected at the course mid-point and quickly returned to you, and you will submit the Notebook at the end with your portfolio; keeping up with it is vital.
- B. This is a writing intensive course with a strong emphasis on your own creative work. The focus will largely be on *generating material, developing ideas, and organizing the work into something meaningful and artful*. As such, students will be required to frequently write and to submit short “pieces” and drafts-in-progress. As a general guide, there will be three different kinds of papers assigned.
 1. Most frequently, you will be asked to submit creative pieces in various stages of the drafting process. Subjects and forms will vary.
 2. You will also be required to write a response paper (1-2 pages max) to a few assigned readings; you will write a brief synopsis of salient points from the readings, and/or you will discuss specifically some aspect of the assigned creative works vis-à-vis where and when the writing is effective, how it might relate to what’s happening in your own work (or not).
 3. We will frequently write in class but you will be expected to do much of your creative and revision work outside of class.
- C. Final Portfolio (Submission date, TBA): You will submit ALL of the work you did during this course, including your notebook, your in-class and out-of-class writing exercises, and also one “finished” short- (approx. 750 word) and one “finished” medium-length final draft of a creative nonfiction essay (between 5-9 pages, typed, double-spaced) that are thoughtful, artful, well-revised pieces of work based on some aspect of your personal cross-cultural experience.
- D. Because we will be generating a lot of material in and outside of class, it is vital that you have a central place (i.e., folder) which you bring to class and into which all of your written *creative* work goes during the course. (Please note: of course you may organize this in any way that suits you – but notes should go elsewhere.)
- E. Workshop: Judicious, respectful participation in the workshopping of your classmates’ work (and your own), twice during the semester.

TEXTS

Selected required readings from the following texts:

The Complete Essays of Michel de Montaigne

Lives Other Than My Own, E. Carrère*

The Truth of the Matter: Art and Craft in Creative Nonfiction, ed. Dinty Moore

In Brief: Short Takes on the Personal, ed. J. Kitchen and Mary Paumier Jones

Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction, Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola

Mystery and Manners, Flannery O'Connor

Selected Letters, Madame de Sévigné

Cross-Cultural Psychology: Human Behavior in Global Perspective, Marshall H. Segall

Two Towns in Provence, by M.F.K. Fisher

The Roman Remains of Southern France, James Bromwich

Sightlines, Kathleen Jamie

The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative, by Vivian Gornick*

Bird by Bird, by Anne LaMott

Mythology, Edith Hamilton

Selected additional readings (e.g., Dowd, Oliver, Alexander, Sedaris, Woods, Moore, etc.), as distributed

* Course texts

EVALUATION AND GRADING

Your grade will be based on:

Participation in group discussions, field studies and workshops	(25%)
Notebooks	(5%)
Writing drafts throughout the semester	(20%)
Midterm Essay	(25%)
Final Essay	(25%).

ATTENDANCE

One of the primary requirements this semester is that you attend class. This is not a lecture class, and its success depends very much on your coming to class on time, prepared for the lesson, and ready to participate in discussion and activities, including pre-scheduled field studies during class hours. Attendance will be part of your final grade. It is your responsibility to make sure you have the assignment(s) in the event of your absence. Progress in writing is directly proportional to steady, disciplined work and the success of the “workshop” experience is directly related to the commitment of each group member. All unexcused absences affect negatively your grade. Each additional unexcused absence above two will affect the final grade by a half letter grade for each absence. IAU excused absences: absences linked to IAU excursions; sickness (a medical certificate is required); emergencies.

In the case of a professor's absence for personal or professional reasons, it may be necessary to make up lost class time in the evening or on Friday afternoon. "Make-up classes" will be announced at least one week in advance; for questions of attendance, exams, due work, etc., they are considered normal course meetings.

CALENDAR

Unit One: Introduction, Imagery, the Notebook

Topic Paper:

Students will write an autobiographical essay; topics to be discussed in class and individually.

Group Discussion:

Selected Topic Papers

The Image Notebook: Recording and analyzing your experience. See handout.

Weekly Reading

Students will also write a summary based on Laughlin’s home-stay experience in Greece (de Tesson) and the change in her belief systems while living within another culture. Excerpts from readings by Orwell, O’Connor, Turnbull.

In-class writing exercises and discussion:

We will closely examine the various techniques used in good creative nonfiction writing (voice, dialogue, tone, point of view, ETC.) and look at effective essay structures that support the unity of content and form. One of the challenges writers face is that of making a personal experience significant to others. We will discuss how writers find (O’Connor) “the universal in the particular,” and look for especially effective passages in our weekly readings that relate specifically to writing from within a “new” culture.

Unit Two: Description and Narrative: the Salient Detail

Topic/Creative Paper:

Pushing off of French philosopher Levi-Strauss’ idea that the essence of a thing is best revealed by describing what it is “like,” students will write a piece of “extended description.” It can be about a thing, an aspect of an event, etc. but must be somehow based in Aix-en-Provence or surrounding areas (to be discussed in class).

Group Discussion

Selected Topic papers.

Weekly Reading

For this week's paper, you will pick a characterization of place or culture in one of the following readings and show how the writer supports his/her observation with anecdotes and salient detail(s). A look at some descriptions in various readings. We will examine how MFK Fisher describes Aix and Marseille, look further at how a few essayists, poets and novelists encounter and characterize places and cultures not their "own" (George Orwell (Spain); Mary McCarthy (Italy); Alison Hawthorne Deming (borderlands Mexico/US); poet Mary Oliver (wilderness in Cape Cod); and novelist Rose Tremain (17th century provincial England, 20th century New Zealand).

Discussion of selected texts

Discussion of interview techniques

Unit Three: Portraiture

Topic Paper

Students will write a "portrait piece," based on an interview (the subject will have a different cultural orientation AND nationality than yours).

Group Discussion

We will discuss selected papers, and talk about any surprising or especially interesting discoveries. We will look for ways of deepening the understanding (on the page) of the person involved, and of improving the characterization.

Weekly Reading

Students will write a paper briefly summarizing Flannery O'Connor's thoughts on the relationship between painting and writing, and students will also select a brief section of one of the following writer's "portraits" and see how the writer is effective (or not).

We will read the "penned portraits" of Madeleine de Scudery and Anne-Marie-Louise D'Orleans, famous women of the Grand Salon, more M.F.K. Fisher, Flannery O'Connor, and a few profile pieces from "Art of the Personal Essay" and Moore's book to look at how writers effectively capture the essence of a person and analyze how the subject's (and writer's) cultural contexts contribute to the piece. We will briefly dip into short readings about how the painters Cezanne and Van Gogh described their approach to portraiture on the canvas and see if we can find any helpful similarities vis-à-vis writing.

Discussion

Unit Four: The Epistolary Form as Literature

Topic Paper

"Letter from France." You will select a recipient (it may be a person or group you know; it may be a "constructed" audience), and pen a letter re. some concrete aspect of your cross-cultural experience thus

far. Importantly, you will also include your *reflections* and *analysis* of it. Describe and explain. Be creative, thoughtful and bold. (You will be exploring how writing for a particular “audience” might affect the content and tone of your “letter,” how much narrative “distance” you, as a writer, require in order to arrive at a fresh, vivid rendering of something that might be new to you, but commonplace for those within the culture – and how the way that you see is changing or developing in response to your new experiences. You will, once again, be asking yourself, *What is this about? What’s happening here?* vis-à-vis what you’re seeing, describing, experiencing.) During this week, each student will meet individually with the teacher to discuss the student’s writing.

Group discussion

Selected Topic Papers.

Weekly Reading

Vivian Gornick. We will closely examine the role of narrative distance in good writing (and, interestingly, in studying abroad). We will examine the ways in which the narrator is NOT exactly the writer of the piece, but a construct of the writer’s imagination employed to most effectively tell the story (whose elements, in nonfiction, are *true – what does this mean: true?*). We will discuss the parallels between good writing and intercultural experiences – *that reflection and analysis express meaning from lived experience*. We will discuss Gornick’s supposition that the “Situation” is not the “Story” (i.e., a Situation is what *happens*, but the story is what it all *means*) and how the writer shapes a piece to find universally significant meaning from its particular elements. (Does this overlap with the experience of studying abroad?). We will read excerpts from the long tradition of Epistolary Travelogues and excerpts from the lively correspondence of the inimitable Madame de Sévigné.

Paper: Discuss Gornick’s Situation vs. the Story and comment, specifically referring to examples in other assigned readings where this idea seems to be effectively implemented. *Consider the difference between a series of interesting occurrences and shaped experience on the page. How is this achieved? (And, interestingly, are there any parallels between the writing process and thoughtfully experienced sojourns abroad?)*

Discussion of Gornick text

Final papers discussion

Unit Five: Humor and the Classics in Literary Nonfiction

Topic Paper

“Lighten Up Francis.” (Kudos to A. LaMott.) Students will write a piece that deftly uses (attempts to use) humor to illustrate and describe some aspect of their own *encounter* with life in another culture and/or the arc of their developing experiences and impressions while living in France. Alternately, students may write a piece specifically contrasting some aspect of French life with that of another culture. (Faire attention! Humor can be tricky.)

Weekly Reading

We will read Anne LaMott and her “Lighten up Francis” essay, and various other essayists and literary travel writers who employ a sense of humor (on the page) to examine the place where cultures and perspectives collide or meet (or, most interestingly, some combo of both). We will look again, through

the lens of humor, at how some writers thoughtfully examine cultural differences, cues, and perspectives – and whose views are challenged as a result of their encounter with “the other.”

Discussion of Anne LaMott text

Final papers discussion, continued

Unit Six: Final Essays

Final Paper

A literary essay on some aspect of personal, intercultural experience to be approved by the instructor beforehand.