

Department of English
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

ENGE3280 – Writing a Life Between Languages
TBC

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TA: TBC

Course description

This course aims first to introduce students to contemporary forms of autobiography writing, including memoir-in-essays, autobiographical novel, hybrid/experimental memoirs and autofiction. We'll look at writing around language and identity across cultures, with a particular focus on diasporic writing in America and Britain. Together, the class will look at themes including memory, alienation and trauma. Students will learn how to approach, analyse and theorize about autobiographical narratives, as well as develop their own narrative writing skills and write their own using the prescribed texts as models. Students will also be given opportunity to critically examine the prescribed texts in relation to the creative approaches the authors have adopted and ethical issues relating to life writing. Ultimately, the assignments will test the students' abilities to understand the genre of life writing, and the possibilities and limitations of this mode of writing.

Learning outcomes

Upon successful completion of the course, you will be able to:

- Recognize and identify life writing's genre conventions, as well as the various ways authors have pushed beyond the existing boundaries of the genre.
- Identify the advantages and pitfalls of writing around "identity" as well as the debates around the categorization of writing about "identity".
- Articulate the affordances and limitations of different media and modes of life writing, ranging from memoir-in-essays to autofiction.
- Develop close readings skills of life writing texts, both in oral presentations and in written essays.
- Deploy narrative skills in your own life writing, drawing on our course texts as models.

Key concepts

Topics	Contents/fundamental concepts
Life writing's genre history and conventions	The relationship between fact and fiction in life writing What do contemporary forms of memoir look like? How do they differ from “straightforward, coherent” narratives of life writing? Are works of life writing intended to “inform” and “educate”?
Key concerns of life writing criticism	The dangers of assuming to speak for a community via the individual narrative Readership of these texts: what kind of writing gets categorized as writing about “identity”? Who is the presumed reader? “Authenticity”: diasporic writing tropes, the concept of native informants, and self-exoticization The incorporation of secondary languages into a primarily English language text What is the most “ethical” way one can write a text about their own families and communities?
Narrative skills	Transforming a memory into a narrative piece Turning the autobiographical “I” into a narrator Scene selection and composite characters Contextual research including relevant cultural and political background and literary traditions Navigating among languages

Course components

Teaching Modes and Learning Activities	
On-site face-to-face Lectures & interactive tutorials	Percentage of time 100%

The following workload schedule per week may help you allocate your time this term:

Lecture	Interactive tutorial	Reading	Writing	Preparing for assignments/
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				examinations/ tutorial activities
In class	In class	Out of class	Out of class	Out of class
2 hrs	1 hr	4 hrs	1 hr	2 hrs
M	M	M	M	M

Assessment type and percentage (please see Blackboard for detailed rubrics)

Assessment Type	Description	Weight
In-class Participation	Learning is a collaborative process, and students are expected to actively engage in both lectures and tutorials. This includes offering insights and proactively asking questions during discussions, and demonstrating that the required reading has been done. Punctuality and attendance will be taken into account.	10%
Tutorial Presentation: Close Reading	Once in the semester during weeks 5-12, you'll offer a 15-20 minute group presentation in your tutorial, in which you develop and share a close reading of an excerpt of one primary text we have read together. The presentation will include a 2-4 page handout, and slides should be sent to tutors the week prior to the presentation. Students should also generate discussion questions relevant to the reading for the rest of the group.	20%
Life Writing (mid-term assignment)	The creative project is an opportunity for students to attempt their own autobiographical writing. They are free to write a personal essay, a prose poem, an autofictional piece, or any other modes of writing provided that it draws from a real-life experience. The piece should be 1500-2000 words, and should include an additional critical introduction that frames the piece—in other words, it should teach the reader how to best approach the piece of writing. Due at the end of reading week.	30%
Final Essay	You will apply what you have learned about analyzing and interpreting examples of life writing as you generate an extended argument (6-8 pages or 1800-2400 words) about one of our primary texts. Your argument should contribute to the broader ongoing scholarly conversation your text is a part of; in order to do that, you'll need to consult and cite several secondary sources. Due at the end of term.	40%

Required readings (subject to revision):

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Karla Cornejo Villavicencio, *The Undocumented Americans*, One World, 2020.
 Nina Mingya Powles, *Small Bodies of Water*, Canongate Books, 2022.
 Paul B. Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak*, Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2021.

All other texts will be provided online, including excerpts of works by Cathy Park Hong, Alexander Chee and Jenny Zhang.

Feedback for evaluation

Students are free to email me at any time or speak to me after class if there are any questions relating to the material or if you have concerns about your individual progress. Each student can also request one twenty-minute session with me or the TA to discuss your assignments. An informal, anonymized feedback session will be conducted in class around mid-term, and at the end of the course, students will be asked to complete Course Evaluations for both the lectures and tutorials for the course. Both I and the department value this information highly, as it allows us to understand what we are doing well and how we can improve. We use your feedback to revise our teaching methods and course content.

Policies on sick leave and late assessment submission

Attendance at lectures and tutorials is mandatory, and shall be marked accordingly. Students are permitted to miss one class without notifying course instructors, and a further class if a valid excuse is provided; any further absences will affect the in-class participation score. Slides are not provided on Blackboard, but you are permitted to take photographs of them in class.

Late work: each day an assignment is late, the mark will be deducted by 1/3 of a letter grade; i.e.: a B becomes a B-. Advance requests for submitting late must be accompanied by a valid reason and must not be made less than a week before the assignment due date, barring unforeseen emergencies.

Course Schedule (subject to revision):

Class	Date	Topic	Reading / Assessments Due
Week 1	TBC	Introduction to life writing: What does it mean to write in between languages? How does that relate to the immigrant experience?	Excerpts from Tash Aw, <i>Strangers on a Pier</i>
----- Week 2	TBC	Bad English	Cathy Park Hong, “Bad English”; Jenny Zhang, “How It Feels”
----- Week 3	TBC	Hong Kong Diasporas	Excerpts from Pik-Shuen Fung, <i>Ghost Forest</i> , Wong Yi, “Overseas Bride”, Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze - Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature

----- Week 4	TBC	Fragments of a Life	Nina Mingya Powles, <i>Small Bodies of Water</i> , pages 1–53
----- Week 5	TBC	What claim do we have to a place?	Excerpts from Shze-Hui T'joa, <i>The Story Game</i>
----- Week 6	TBC	Writing Your Own Life I	Melissa Febos, “The Heart-Work: Writing About Trauma as a Subversive Act”; T Kira Madden, “Writing is not Therapy”; Leslie Jamison, “The Empathy Exams”
----- Week 7	TBC	-----Lunar New Year -----	
----- Week 8	TBC	The possibilities and limitations of diasporic writing	Ocean Vuong, “A Letter to My Mother That She Will Never Read”; Som-Mai Nguyen, “Blunt-Force Ethnic Credibility”
----- Week 9	TBC	The Immigrant Memoir I: writing other characters in your life	Excerpts from Hua Hsu, <i>Stay True</i>
----- Week 10	TBC	The Immigrant Memoir II: your writing ‘voice’	Excerpt from Karla Cornejo Villavicencio, <i>The Undocumented Americans</i> , Lauren Berlant, <i>Cruel Optimism</i>
----- Week 11	TBC	Writing Your Own Life II	“Living to Tell the Tale: The Complicated Ethics of Creative Nonfiction,” Lynn Z. Bloom; “Can a Memoir Say Too Much?” Alexandra Schwartz

Week 12	TBC	The collapse of language	Excerpts from Theresa Hak Kwung Cha, <i>Dictée</i>
-----			----- Mid-term assignment due -----
Week 13	TBC	Writing between the languages of gender	Excerpt from Paul B. Preciado, <i>Can the Monster Speak?</i> ; Alexander Chee, “Girl” in <i>How to Write an Autobiographical Novel</i>

Week 14	TBC	Essay Clinic	Identifying key issues and themes throughout the course and formulating thesis statements for their chosen text for the final essay.
			Assignment due: Final Essay

Course website

We will be using Blackboard Learn as the eLearning platform in this course. Blackboard Learn will be used for a) dissemination of course materials such as readings, discussion questions, assignment prompts, and rubrics, b) supplementary class discussion, and c) d) course announcements.

You can access Blackboard Learn at: <https://elearn.cuhk.edu.hk/>

A demonstration of how to access Blackboard Learn to post and respond to announcements, download resources, and use the discussion forums will be given in the first lecture.

Academic honesty and plagiarism

Attention is drawn to University policy and regulations on honesty in academic work, and to the disciplinary guidelines and procedures applicable to breaches of such policy and regulations. Details may be found at <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/>.

With each assignment, students will be required to submit a signed **declaration** that they are aware of these policies, regulations, guidelines and procedures.

- In the case of group projects, all members of the group should be asked to sign the declaration, each of whom is responsible and liable to disciplinary actions, irrespective of whether he/she has signed the declaration and whether he/she has contributed, directly or indirectly, to the problematic contents.
- For assignments in the form of a computer-generated document that is principally text-based and submitted via VeriGuide, the statement, in the form of a receipt, will be issued by the system upon students' uploading of the soft copy of the assignment.
- Students are fully aware that their work may be investigated by AI content detection software

to determine originality.

- Students are fully aware of the AI approach(es) adopted in the course. In the case where some AI tools are allowed, students have made proper acknowledgment and citations as suggested by the course teacher.

Assignments without a properly signed declaration will not be graded by teachers.

Only the final version of the assignment should be submitted via VeriGuide. **The assignment must be submitted also to Blackboard in addition to VeriGuide, or it will not be marked.**

The submission of a piece of work, or a part of a piece of work, for more than one purpose (e.g. to satisfy the requirements in two different courses) without declaration to this effect shall be regarded as having committed undeclared multiple submissions. It is common and acceptable to reuse a turn of phrase or a sentence or two from one's own work; but wholesale reuse is problematic. In any case, agreement from the course teacher(s) concerned should be obtained prior to the submission of the piece of work.

The copyright of the teaching materials, including lecture notes, assignments and examination questions, etc., produced by staff members/ teachers of The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) belongs to CUHK. Students may download the teaching materials produced by the staff members/ teachers from the Learning Management Systems, e.g. Blackboard, adopted by CUHK for their own educational use, but shall not distribute/ share/ copy the materials to a third-party without seeking prior permission from the staff members/ teachers concerned.

Use of generative AI tools

Approach 2 – Use only with prior permission

Students may use some AI tools in some in-class activities and assignments on the following conditions:

1. The AI tools to be used are restricted to the following tools:
Large Language Model (LLM) text generation tools including ChatGPT and others
2. The specified AI tools will only be allowed for the following types of class activities and assignments:
Proofreading and grammar-checking of Final Essay
3. Collaboration of AI tools is only allowed for the following purposes / tasks:
Proofreading and grammar-checking of Final Essay. Do not use GenAI tools for any other assignments OR for any generative or other drafting purposes of the Final Essay.
4. The input contributed by the AI tools are properly acknowledged and cited; and
5. The input together with the prompts used to elicit the AI responses should be highlighted or included as appendices wherever appropriate.

For this class, if you use GenAI tools to proofread and/or grammar-check your Final Essay, you must include in your final submission to Veriguide both the polished Final Essay and, as an Appendix, the pre-proofreading draft you entered into GenAI. You must also write a reflective paragraph about your experience using GenAI for the purpose of proofreading and/or grammar-checking. How much did it help? What did it fix, and what were the limits of relying on it?

Acknowledging support from AI tools

Students are required to acknowledge all functional uses of a generative AI tool and cite it when they paraphrase, quote, or incorporate into their own work any content (whether it is text, image, data, or other format) that was created by it.

- i. An example of acknowledgement

I acknowledge the use of (name of AI tool – e.g. ChatGPT (<https://chat.openai.com/>) to (specify the support, e.g. plan my essay), generate some ideas for the content, ask for examples of data collection instruments, get the dates of historical events, etc.).

- ii. An example of citation

OpenAI. (2023). *ChatGPT* (Mar 20 version). <https://chat.openai.com/chat>

(Students are reminded that due to the rapid developments of generative AI tools, some citation formats may be updated regularly.)

- iii. An example of including texts generated by an AI tool in their work

"The following text was generated by an AI tool / language model (ChatGPT):"
[Insert the text generated by ChatGPT here.]

- iv. An example of including texts generated by an AI tool and the prompts that were used to elicit the text from the AI tool

"[The prompt], as generated by an AI language model (ChatGPT):"
[Insert the text generated by ChatGPT in response to the prompt.]

Students are reminded to learn and use the AI tools responsibly and ethically and be aware of the limitations.

Students are reminded to clarify with the course teacher and obtain permission if necessary when in doubt.

Grade descriptors

Course Grade Descriptors

Grade A / Excellent: Outstanding performance on ALL learning outcomes.

Demonstrates the ability to synthesize and apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a manner that would surpass the normal expectations at this level and typical of standards that may be common at higher levels of study. The 'A' grade should be reserved for truly excellent work that exceeds the level expected for the majority of students and are expected to be achieved only by a small minority.

Grade A- / Very Good: Generally outstanding performance on ALMOST ALL learning outcomes.

Demonstrates the ability to synthesize and apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a manner that would fully fulfill the normal expectations at this level and occasionally reaches standards that may be common at higher levels of study.

Grade B+ / Good (Plus): HIGH performance on all learning outcomes, OR HIGH performance on some learning outcomes which compensates WELL for slightly less satisfactory performance

on others, resulting in overall substantial performance. Demonstrates the ability to apply WELL the principles or skills learned in the course in a comprehensive manner that would sufficiently fulfill the normal expectations at this level WELL.

Grade B / Good: SUBSTANTIAL performance on all learning outcomes, OR SUBSTANTIAL performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for slightly less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance. Demonstrates the ability to apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a MORE COMPREHENSIVE manner that would sufficiently fulfill the normal expectations at this level.

Grade B- / Good (Minus): GOOD performance on all learning outcomes, OR GOOD performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for slightly less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance. Demonstrates the ability to apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a COMPREHENSIVE manner that would sufficiently fulfill the normal expectations at this level.

Grade C+ / Adequate (Plus): VERY ADEQUATE performance on the majority of learning outcomes. Demonstrates the ability to apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a SOMEWHAT SUSTAINED manner that would meet the basic requirement at this level.

Grade C / Adequate: ADEQUATE performance on the majority of learning outcomes. Demonstrates the ability to partially apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a manner that would meet the basic requirement at this level.

Grade C- / Adequate (Minus): SOMEWHAT ADEQUATE performance on A NUMBER OF learning outcomes. Demonstrates the ability to SOMEWHAT apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a manner that would meet the BARE basic requirement at this level.

Grade D+ / Pass (Plus): BARELY SATISFACTORY performance on A FEW learning outcomes. Addresses the task inadequately by meeting the basic requirement at this level only in some areas while responding minimally with possibly tangential content in others.

Grade D / Pass: ALMOST BARELY SATISFACTORY performance on VERY FEW learning outcomes. Addresses the task inadequately by meeting the basic requirement at this level only in very few areas while responding very minimally with possibly tangential content in others.

Grade F / Failure: Unsatisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes, OR failure to meet specified assessment requirements. Fails to address the task and likely does not understand what the task requires. In other words, the work completely misses the point.

There will be no arrangement for lectures to be recorded except in unforeseen circumstances, e.g. the arrangement of a makeup class, whereby recordings will be made available to students who are unable to attend said makeup class. The copyright of any lecture recordings shared in the course, whether they are produced by teachers, students, or peer note-takers, belongs to the University. Students should not share these recordings with others without obtaining prior written consent from the teacher(s).