

AMH4930/

*Writing
Women's
Lives*

Spring 2024

Dr. Louise Newman
lnewman@ufl.edu

Office hrs: M, 1-2:00
And by appointment
Keene Flint 212



Emily Dickinson (left) with her friend, Kate Scott Turner Anthon, c. 1859

*If **biography** is largely founded on a belief in the singularity and significance of an individual's contribution to history, **microhistory** is founded upon almost the opposite assumption: however singular a person's life may be, the value of examining it lies in how it serves as an **allegory** for the culture as a whole.*

--Jill Lepore, 2001

Biography illuminates history, inspires by example, and fires the imagination...

--Matina Horner, 1988

Description: What is this course about?

This course examines the ways that a few women living in the United States from the 19th-21st centuries have made sense of their lives and the world through their "writings" (letters, diaries, memoirs, novels, poetry, but also music, painting, and photography), **and** the ways that historians write about those individuals in an effort to understand how "ordinary" and "extraordinary" lives can illuminate history and culture.

The course opens with a basic question: Why does someone write about her life and how does that writing come to be published? The answers are as varied as the individual and the text itself. Some of the writings we will encounter were clearly intended for publication from the outset: to bear witness to tragedy or injustice; to earn money to support a family or a political cause; to garner respect and renown for the author (although cultural mores often prevented women from acknowledging the latter). Other kinds of "biographical" texts (novels, poetry, blues performances) were intended to fulfill various needs of the author and a contemporary audience-- to endure suffering, to console a community, to connect with others. Some writings were never meant to be shared outside a small circle of friends, and yet some family member or editor saw fit to disseminate them after the author had died. So, in addition to examining

closely the contents of a life as it was lived or *imagined*, we will study how and why that life took on larger significance at specific moments in time—was it because of its singularity, its meaning for others (inspiration or equally possibly admonition), the impact it had on contemporaries, or the possibilities it represented for those to come-- or as is most likely, some combination of all of these elements?

The lives we will be examining allow us new perspectives on specific historical phenomena that include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Atlantic World/ slave trade/slavery in the United States
- Racial identity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including black, white, Indian and mixed racial identities
- Day-to-day lives of working-class and middle-class women
- Feminism in various guises, including the Blues songwriter/performer of the early twentieth century and the “liberated woman” of the late twentieth century
- Lives of newly arrived immigrants and first- and second- generation Americans
- Gender expression and sexuality
- Queer identities

Although most of the material treated in this course deals with people living in the United States, students may work on women living in other regions of the world for their final projects.

Objectives: What is this course designed to help students achieve?

This course is one of the ways that students majoring in history can fulfill the requirement of taking a research seminar (any history course with the number 4930). Research seminars have the common aim of giving students an experience of working with primary sources, teaching them how to form their own interpretations and to compose historical accounts that are based upon primary sources. This course shares those objectives while also recognizing that historical narratives can take different forms beyond academic essays, including photographic exhibits, film documentaries, graphic novels and the like. Thus, although students will practice writing expository papers of varying lengths, they will also have an opportunity to explore other forms of history-telling.

In sum, then, this course has the following objectives:

- To guide students through the process of researching and writing essays based on interpreting women’s writings; in the process, students will discover how writing can fulfill specific purposes for their authors and yet serve different ends for the historian who recovers and makes use of these texts.
- To introduce students to specific forms of historiography and cultural criticism that historians compose to explore the larger external forces that inform the personal life events of their biographical subjects.

- To hone critical thinking, reading and writing skills, which will serve students well in any profession/occupation students may pursue upon graduation.

Requirements

This course is a discussion-based seminar that meets one day a week, which requires a great deal of advanced planning and discipline on the part of all participants (instructor included!). The assignments are designed to facilitate in-class work and independent research; thus there is a strict attendance policy: students may take one unexcused absence without penalty, but any missed work will have to be made up with additional writing assignments. Thereafter, grade deductions will be taken from the final course grade for each subsequent absence. To facilitate discussion early in the semester, students will write four critical analyses of assigned readings, turning these in the night before the seminar meets (so on Tuesday evenings by midnight). Then after spring break, the course turns into a writing workshop—see following deadlines.

Deadlines toward final project (worth 40% of final course grade)

3/6 Proposal due/Conferences
 3/13 Spring Break (no class)
 3/20
 3/27 5-page draft (peer review in class)
 4/3 10-page draft (peer review in class)
 4/10, 4/17 Presentations
 4/24 Final draft due

Important Warning

Because this seminar relies heavily on biographies and memoirs, many of the readings are long and cannot be excerpted easily. Students will be expected to read approximately 200-300 pages per week and complete short writing assignments in advance of every class session for the first half of the semester.

Readings – Hold off on purchasing until class meets on January 10.

Reference books

- **Rampolla**, Mary Lynn. *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*. Any edition. A free E-book (PDF) will be made available through Canvas, but students may prefer to purchase an inexpensive hard copy from Amazon.
- **Booth**, Wayne C., and Gregory Colombe. *The Craft of Research* (Chicago University Press, 1995, 2003). A free E-book (PDF) will be made available through Canvas.

Unpublished/archived primary sources

- Commonplace book of T. Blake (<https://findingaids.uflib.ufl.edu/repositories/2/resources/660>)
- Lucy Pratt's Music Book (<https://findingaids.uflib.ufl.edu/repositories/2/resources/664>)
- *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge* (https://ufl-flvc.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01FALSC_UFL/6ad6fc/alma990228050950306597)
- **Multiple editions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Little Women*** (UF/Baldwin collection)

Published primary sources

- **Alcott**, Louisa May. *Little Women*. First published in 1868. Introduction from the edition by John Matteson. We will read sections of this book from the Norton Critical edition.
- **Chesnut**, Mary. *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*. Ed. C. Vann Woodward. Yale University Press, 1981. Excerpts to be determined.
- **Jacobs**, Harriet Ann. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. First published in 1861 under a pseudonym, Linda Brent, with the assistance of a white editor, Lydia Maria Child, who was a famous abolitionist and author at the time. The memoir has been republished many times and there are several good scholarly editions. Jean Yellin has written what many still consider to be the definitive biography of Jacobs.
- "Conveniently Undisclosed," student-conducted oral history published in *Alpata* 2019. (PDF available from course website in Canvas)
- ***Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge***. Original text by Frances Harriet Whipple with Elleanor Eldridge. First published 1890. [To be examined at Smathers]
- **Faust**, Drew Gilpin. *Necessary Trouble: Growing up at Midcentury*. 2023
- **Bechdel**, Alison, *Fun Home* (2006).
- **Others of the students' choosing**

Scholarship: Cultural Biographies/Microhistories/Literary Histories, etc.

Pertaining to Women's Lives in the Nineteenth Century

- **Acord**, Sophia Krzys. "A Taste for What 'Moves' Us: The Audience of American Impressionism." in *Monet and American Impressionism*. Ed., Dulce M. Román, Gainesville: Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida, 2015, 91-95.
- **Hodes**, Martha. *The Sea Captain's Wife*.
- **Moody, Joycelyn K.** "Introduction" to *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge*. Original text by Frances Harriet Whipple with Elleanor Eldridge, 1898. Ed. Joycelyn K. Moody. West Virginia University Press, 2014, pp. 1-90.

- **Newman**, Louise M. "The 'Woman Question' in American Impressionist Painting, 1880-1920." in *Monet and American Impressionism*. Ed. Dulce M. Román. Gainesville: Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida, 2015, 75-83.
- **Smith-Rosenberg**, Carroll. "The Female World of Love and Ritual," *Signs*. PDF available from Canvas.
- **Reisen**, Harriet. *Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women*. New York: Henry Holt, 2009.
- **Wolff**, Cynthia Griffin. *Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge: Perseus Publishing, 1986, 1988.
- **Woo**, Ilyon. *Husband, Wife, Master, Slave*, 2023. [biography of Helen Craft]

Pertaining to Women's Lives in the Twentieth Century

- **Carby**, Hazel. "It Jus Be's That Way Sometime." PDF on Canvas.
- **Davis**, Angela Y. *Blues Legacy and Black Feminism*, 1999. PDF on Canvas.
- **Gordon**, Linda. *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2009.
- **Hutchinson**, George. *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*. PDF on Canvas.
- **Woodson**, **Jacqueline**. *Brown Girl Dreaming*. New York: Nancy Paulsen books (Penguin), 2014. PDF on Canvas.

Pertaining to Women's Lives in the Twenty-First Century

- **Readings to be chosen by students**

Assignments (1000 total points)

- First assignment to gain entrance to the course -- poetic fragment or short essay on a woman whose life you find inspiring, instructive, or interesting in some way
- **4 short analyses** (due weeks 3-6, 500-600 words each, **200 pts**). These "thought pieces" are due on Tuesday evening, the night before the readings will be discussed in class the following day. Then students will revise and resubmit them in week 8, along with other material for the "commonsense book" assignment that makes up the midterm. A point of focus for each thought piece may be set by the instructor or students may choose their own themes, e.g. explain how a particular writing came to be published, why scholarly attention followed and how the author's reputation has altered as a result, or explain how a particular piece of writing has taken on new significance at different points in time as it has been "translated" into new literary or cultural forms—this assignment would work with Alcott's *Little Women*, since the book is still reprinted and has been made into several films; or with Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, which was first published as a graphic novel and then made in a Broadway play.
- **Midterm assignment** (due weeks 7-8, 1500-2100 words, **200 pts**). Create a "commonsense" book (scrapbook) of ideas – notes and commentary on the readings focused on one or two themes of the students' choosing
- **Oral or digital history component (200 pts)**

- **Final project** of the student's own devising, done in stages, weeks 12-15 (**400 pts**).

Questions for consideration

- Why is this person's life considered significant today? (personal accomplishments, extent of impact on others, either while alive or through a legacy left after her death; reflective of external forces, symbolic of unusual, common, or universal experiences, addresses a present-day need or concern).
- In what ways does it matter that the person is a woman; what other aspects of her personhood/identity have been signaled out for analysis? (race, class, sexual identity, social status, religious affiliation, nation of origin, community/area of the country in which she was raised)
- What kind of heuristic devices/approaches have historians used to make meaning of the person's life? What narrative "arcs" or "trajectories" or "genres" (borrowing from Hayden White's description of narrative forms that have emerged from the study of Shakespearean plays, tragedy, comedy, history-- irony) can be applied to the person's life to make sense of it?
- How did this life come into the historical record? (through an archive? an oral history? public records, public performances, journalistic accounts, publication of a memoir or other form of writing? Family member or someone close to the family who was committed to preserving a legacy?)
- What aspects of this person's life "speak" to a culture, a place, and a time; what is unique, special or admirable about the person?
- How does history (external events) impinge upon the person's life? Or conversely, what does the person's life story tell us about history?
- Why should this particular life story continue to be told?
- What larger themes (historical insights) emerge from the telling of (her)story?
- What response(s) in the form of emotion or action does the author, biographer, memoirist, etc. want to elicit from the reader/viewer/audience?

The course will have students explore different genres and methodologies that are commonly used to write biographies and microhistories:

- **Genre/Form:** Biography, autobiography, memoir, microhistory, oral history, documentary, pictorial histories, graphic novels
- **Methods:** Framing Devices, Voice, Persona, Perspective
- **Tools & Scholarly Apparatus:** Family Trees, Timelines, Historical gloss (explanatory footnote)

Weekly Schedule (Overview)

Week 1. Jan 10	Introduction: Genres & Legacies (Woodson , Alcott, Stowe, Dickinson) Assign: which woman writer(s), artists, singers, have influenced you?
Week 2. Jan 17	Writing about Domesticity & Labor (Hodes , <i>Sea Captain's Wife</i> OR Matteson and Reisen on Alcott)
Week 3. Jan 24	Writing about Enslavement & Freedom Authorial confusions & authenticity concerns (Woo on Craft, Moody on Eldridge, <i>Smathers visit</i>)
Week 4. Jan 31	Writing about Religious Faith and Secular Romance (<i>Alcott</i> , <i>Little Women</i> , Wolff on Dickinson, Smith-Rosenberg)
Week 5. Feb 7	Writing/Singing about Suffering & Sexuality, 1920-1930 (Hutchinson on Nella Larsen, Davis, & Carby on Bessie Smith)
Week 6. Feb 14	<i>Digital History?/Oral History</i>
Week 7. Feb 21	<i>Digital History?</i>
Week 8. Feb 28	Drawing Attachments (Bechdel)
Week 9. Mar 6	Midterm Assignment Due
Week 10. Mar 13	Spring Break---No class
Week 11. Mar 20	To be determined
Week 12. Mar 27	5 pages due
Week 13. Apr 3	10 pages due/ Peer review in class
Week 14. Apr 10	Presentations
Week 15. Apr 17	Presentations
Week 16. Apr 24	Final draft due