

MALS 70000: Introduction to Liberal Studies
INVENTING THE SELF

Fall 2013: Wednesdays 6:30 – 8:30

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Four centuries after Descartes’s famous declaration about the self—“I think, therefore I am”—the origins, meaning, and even the definition of selfhood remain mysterious and contested. After much searching—by psychologists, neuroscientists, fiction writers, poets, filmmakers, sociologists, and anthropologists—nobody has found a thing called The Self. In this course, students will practice graduate level reading, writing, and research through the examination of theories and representations of self-invention from a variety of disciplines and genres.

Contemporary thinkers working in diverse disciplines and genres have invented theories of selfhood that address a common question: Why does the self feel whole and real if we can’t locate it? Neurologist Antonio Damasio argues the self is the product of “distributed” brain processes that create a feeling of wholeness; philosopher Daniel Dennett has proposed a “multiple drafts” theory to suggest that the self is a continuously revised composition; literary critic Nancy K. Miller proposes that the selves we find in autobiography are the product of social relations (and textual ones). Though these theories are diverse, they share the premise that the self is anything but static. Many contemporary thinkers share the belief that the self is a dynamic invention—a continuously evolving product of physiology, social relations, artistic practice, and technological innovation. In this course, we will investigate the methods various thinkers and writers use to explore this proposition and the many questions it raises.

Course readings are divided into three units: 1. *Mind, Body, Brain, & Self*, 2. *Narrative Selves*, and 3. *Technologies, Writing & the Self*. Each unit combines a variety of disciplinary methods and genres of writing. Class discussion will focus on the how particular methods or genres allow us to ask certain questions and produce particular kinds of knowledge or understanding.

Students will contribute to our course blog on a weekly basis and develop research projects that allow them pursue questions about selfhood from the perspectives of their particular disciplinary interests. In most cases, these projects will engage more than a single discipline, giving students the opportunity to practice the methodologies of particular disciplines and the synthesis required to create productive dialogue among disciplines.

Course Requirements

All students taking the course will complete the following:

- Bi-weekly reading responses on the course blog + bi-weekly commentary on responses posted by others*
- Research Project: The Research Behind the Lecture (including a proposal, an annotated bibliography, a draft, and a revised essay)

Reading Responses

Each week, half the class will post reading responses to our course blog by the **Tuesday before that week's meeting**. The other half of the class will post comments to at least two of their classmates' posts before Wednesday afternoon. I will post a set of reading questions to the blog by the Saturday before each week's meeting. You may choose to discuss one of these questions in your response, or you may choose an angle of your own. Reading responses should demonstrate engagement, imagination, and critical thought, but they need not be particularly formal or long. Two or three paragraphs is about the right length. It's a good idea to include direct quotations from the texts discussed. It's also a good idea to raise questions, explore moments of confusion or ambiguity, and make connections to other texts. Comments should be respectful responses, but they should also be probing and critical.

Research Projects

For your research project, you will choose an online lecture—for example, a TED Talk or a lecture from an online course—and make an argument about the relationship between the speaker's rhetoric and audience. You will conduct research into the intellectual or scholarly research and debates that inform the lecture and evaluate its claims based on what you learn.

Texts to Purchase

(All other readings listed on the calendar can be found on our "Readings" page, as links or PDFs.)

Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home* (Mariner Books 2007)

Dennis Cooper, *God., Jr.* (Grove Press 2005)

Antonio Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain* (Pantheon 2010)

Siri Hustvedt, *The Shaking Woman, or a History of My Nerves* (Picador 2010)

Alva Noë, *Out of Our Heads: Why You Are Not Your Brain and Other Lessons from the Biology of Consciousness* (Hill and Wang 2010)

Matias Viegner, *2500 Random Things about Me Too* (Les Figues 2012)

John Wray, *Lowboy* (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux 2010)

Writing Groups

During the second half of the semester, you will be assigned to a writing group. You will complete your research projects in stages: proposal, annotated bibliography, draft, and revision. Members of each writing group will read each other's drafts and offer feedback at each of these stages.

Calendar

August 28: What Is a Self, Anyway?

Introductions

Workshop on rhetoric, audience, and evidence in video lectures:

Antonio Damasio: "The Quest to Understand Consciousness" (online lecture)

Jill Bolte Taylor, "My Stroke of Insight" (online lecture)

Gordon Harvey: "Elements of the Academic Essay" (handout)

September 4: Mind, Body, Brain & Self

No class

September 11: Mind, Body, Brain & Self

Siri Hustvedt, *The Shaking Woman, or a History of My Nerves*

Paul John Eakin, “Autobiographical Consciousness: Body, Brain, Self, and Narrative” (Chapter 2, *Living Autobiographically*)

September 18: Mind, Body, Brain & Self

Antonio Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind*, Chapters 1-4

Susan Blackmore, “The Self Is an Illusion” (online lecture)

September 25: Mind, Body, Brain & Self

Alva Noë, *Out of Our Heads*, Preface + Chapters 1-4 & 6

Alva Noë, “Why Is Consciousness So Baffling?” (online lecture / interview)

Workshop: Evaluating Rhetoric in Writing and Lectures

October 2: Narrative Selves

Dan McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, Chapter 1: “The Meaning of Stories” & 5: “Character and Imago”

János László, *The Science of Stories: An Introduction to Narrative Psychology*, Chapter 7: “Identity and Narrative”

Mark Gaipa, “8 Strategies for Critically Engaging Sources”

Workshop: Engaging Sources & Establishing Authority

October 9: Narrative Selves

Rita Carter, “A Brief History of Ourselves” & “How Multiple Are You?” (from *Multiplicity: The New Science of Personality, Identity, and the Self*)

Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*

October 16: Narrative Selves

John Wray, *Lowboy*

Simon McCarthy Jones, *Hearing Voices*, Chapter 5: “The Lived Experience of Hearing Voices in Individuals Diagnosed with a Psychotic Disorder; or, the Journey from Patient to Non-Patient”

Due: Drafts of research project proposals (via e-mail, to me and to your writing group)

October 30: Narrative Selves

Gail Hornstein, *Agnes’s Jacket*, Chapters 1-5

Simon McCarthy Jones, “Neuroscience and Hearing Voices: It’s the Brain, Stupid”

(from *Hearing Voices: The Histories, Causes, and Meanings of Auditory Verbal Hallucinations*)

Eleanor Longden, “The Voices in My Head”

Rufus May, “Living Mindfully with Voices” (online lecture)

Due: Research project proposals (to me, via email)

Workshop: Finding and Evaluating Sources

November 6: Technologies, Writing & The Self

Matias Viegner, *2500 Random Things about Me Too*

Nancy K. Miller, "But Enough about Me, What Do You Think of My Memoir?" (Chapter 1, *But Enough About Me: Why We Read Other People's Lives*)

Workshop: Annotated Bibliographies

November 13: Technologies, Writing & The Self

Emily Singer, "The Measured Life" (*The MIT Technology Review*)

Gary Wolf, "The Quantified Self" (online lecture)

John McCarthy & Peter Wright, *Technology as Experience*, Chapters 1 & 9

"QS: Quantified Self: Self Knowledge through Numbers" (organization website)

Steven Jonas, "Stressing Out Loud" (online lecture)

Annotated Bibliographies due

November 20: Technologies, Writing & The Self

Chapter 3, "Intimacy" (from Mitsuko, *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media*)

Sherry Turkle, "Introduction," Chapters 8 & 12 (from *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*)

Sherry Turkle: "Connected, but Alone?" (online lecture)

November 27: No class (Friday schedule)**December 4: Technologies, Writing & The Self**

Dennis Cooper, *God., Jr.*

Mitsuko Ito and Matteo Brittani, "Gaming" (Chapter, Mitsuko, *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media*)

Friday, December 6: Performance

Struck, at HERE Theater

Sunday, December 8

Drafts of research projects due (to writing groups via email)

December 11

Research project workshop

December 18

No Class: Revised Research Projects due (to me, via email)