



“Memory to Ink”¹: Autobiography Project in Portugal

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a project centered on the teaching of Autobiography and Personal Narrative at the University of Lisbon. The course was an effort to ignite personal/collective empowerment through writing in a country where such writing has long been repressed by a variety of cultural imperatives. Students read autobiographical articles and book excerpts by well-known English-language writers, read practically-oriented theoretical pieces, and wrote stories of their own lives prompted by their readings and discussions as they experienced and gained authority through authorship. Their growing self-advocacy registered as the course progressed, evidenced by the detail and reflection, authenticity and complexity of their written work.

“I am writing this to reach out to you, the person who sometimes feels the loneliest among friends, the one who doesn’t know where he is going in life and the one who spends most of his time looking at the nothingness of his own thoughts, looking for answers to questions and problems that seem impossible to solve. I’m calling out to all of you who feel empty without knowing what is missing.”

-João B.

“Everyone has a personal life, but writing autobiographical books is not common in Portuguese culture. This happens for two reasons: cultural and financial. Due to a long period of dictatorship where the personal voice and even thoughts were repressed, the authors focused their production mainly on fictional works namely romance, tale, chronicles and poetry. This gap lasted for decades and consequently very few autobiographies were

produced. Publishers don't see the Portuguese market very open to this kind of literature, so the public is not accustomed to see this kind of literature available in stores."

-Veronica K.

-students in "Autobiography and Personal Narrative", Lisbon, Portugal, 2012

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In May 2010, I gave a seminar at the University of Lisbon on the Egyptian writer Nawal el Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, a genre-fluid text with novelistic and autobiographical resonances. The context of the seminar was women's autobiography, and when I asked faculty and students present if they thought life writing was an important genre in Portugal, every person in the audience shook their heads "no".² What followed was a lengthy discussion as to why they thought this was so, with many aspects of Portuguese culture/life coming up as possible reasons for the "disinterest": "Portuguese people don't like calling attention to themselves"; "it's the influence of the church that wants us to be humble"; "there's no long tradition of autobiography in Portuguese culture"; "it's the residual repressions of the Salazar era" and so forth. Faculty and students were greatly animated by the subject, with conversation lasting far after the official session ended. Exploring then the possibility of my teaching a course there in autobiography, with some practice for students in writing autobiographical pieces, a colleague expressed doubt as to the value of engaging students in writing about their own lives. To give a sense of the immense possibilities of such a practice, I asked if she could find something interesting to say about her father's clothing. After a moment's silence, she nodded in quiet and serious assent: "Yes, there's a story there."

A year later, in the spring of 2011, I began developing the project to teach a course in autobiography and personal narrative at the University of Lisbon. I knew the easier part of the teaching would focus on short autobiographical texts and on such issues in current critical discourse as the relation of fact and fiction as they play out in autobiographical narrative, the shifting "centers" and "margins" of the canon, the role of memory in the construction of identity and the role of language in projections of self. The more difficult portion, and, I believed, the activity from which they'd learn more about the genre, would be engaging students to get 'inside' life writing by doing some of their own.

From my work with students in the American classroom, I knew that a vital aspect of self-value and confidence could develop through writing

about one’s own experiences, made complex and contextualized with reflections upon those experiences. In many cases, such reporting and thoughtful commentary could also bring to light wider social and cultural issues, as private experiences come into public view. Students begin to see that their own lives are both influenced by a variety of societal imperatives, and autonomous, as they navigate their way through the forest of ‘musts’, ‘shoulds’ and ‘can’ts’, guided by their own brightening lights.

So the real motive of the Portugal project was the gesture toward developing in students a growing sense of individual worth, that their lives ‘mattered’, for I suspected that the larger Portuguese culture reflected, to some extent, the diminished energy of an under-developed collective individualism.³ In this place with a “passion for tranquility” (Hatton 281) I hoped the course would invigorate students sufficiently to feel that they were entitled to ask questions, to speak and to expect to be heard in a society that had kept such feelings of value under wraps.

The ethos of the course was clear to me and may seem rather radical in its connection between valuing personal narrative and the more general liberties and energies of the culture. José Gil, Portugal’s great contemporary philosopher, suggests the connection in his book *Portugal Today: Fear of Existing*:

“Portugal has a democracy with a low level of citizenship and liberty. [...] We know little – I mean, the ones who know are rare – what free thinking is. Our thinking rarely expresses our maximum life potency. In other words: we are far from expressing, from exploring and therefore far from knowing and claiming our civic and social rights of citizenship, that is, our freedom of speech, the right to justice, the multiple liberties and individual rights in the social field” (7).⁴

I trusted that ‘free writing’, a foundational process of the course I’d planned, would generate more ‘free thinking’ with resulting inquiry, reflective commentary and critical thinking. Free writing, the singular act of writerly empowerment and self-advocacy, would do an ‘end-run’ around students’ inhibitions, self-criticism and cultural constraints.⁵ Our work would run counter to Portugal’s “national experience of ‘non-inscription’” (Lessa 205).⁶

The course was designed to confer ‘authorship’/authority on students regarding their own lives, the deepest, most affecting value of life story writing. Though not ostensibly related to what we think of as ‘politics’, our study addressed the more basic political idea of how power is expressed and enacted in society and in relationships. The method was to provide guidance and opportunity for students to think, speak and

write about their own lives in the context of a variety of societal structures – cultural, social, familial, religious, personal – to create a more engaged, thoughtful, active citizenry. In the context of the classroom, students indeed became more engaged, thoughtful and active citizens. They came to class regularly (something I was assured they would not do after the first month), came prepared with printed-out copies of their readings marked with their notes, and offered interesting commentary on the texts under study. It was here that the newly vigorous integration of self-in-world began.

I had no illusions about the immediate challenges I'd face asking Portuguese students to write about themselves and their families. I'd observed in my multicultural American classroom varying degrees of comfort with personal narrative, and have come to recognize that many cultures don't experience the genre in the same way Americans do. Some students express unfamiliarity, discomfort or even a feeling of traversing forbidden terrain as they navigate the borders of private/public discourse and cultural difference. Respectful of their conceptual frameworks, I find ways for students to successfully begin voicing their stories, which often give rise to insights about their cultural assumptions. Students from very different environments surprisingly find commonalities with each other. They express, though sometimes tentatively and indirectly, larger issues of identity and authority embedded in responses to their own cultural, social and political situations and comments about shared literary texts.

Such respect and adaptation guided my course development for the class in Portugal as I put together a syllabus. Although autobiography has been a relatively uncommon genre in Portuguese literary history (and self-disclosure and reflection unusual in quotidian life), I understand there's been a spate of autobiographical fictions generated in recent years that may signal the growing importance of the genre in literary and cultural studies. Of course, the great Pessoa would have needed an entire box for his *'bilhetes de identidade'*, as his heteronymic writings call into question the very singularity suggested by the term. As well, his *Book of Disquiet*, described by him as a "factless autobiography," questions the whole effort of creating a unified sense of self projected in writing. Thus, as critical attention has shifted from its traditional focus on the 'life', through the modern inspection of the 'self', Pessoa's writings give early voice(s) to what is now understood as the post-modern view of the autobiographic self, whose diffuse, fluid, polyphonal existence comes into being by means of the act of writing.⁷ This continuum would provide context for our autobiographical practice, as students worked to develop confidence in their own written voices.

PART 2. CLASS PROCEDURE AND REQUIREMENTS

The actual project ran from September 17 through December 19, 2012. All teaching, reading and writing was done in English, with students having a B2 competence in the language.⁸ Seventy-three students were registered for the course, including ten Erasmus students, who came with varying degrees of English competence and an array of cultural values and assumptions. These students from Germany, France, Turkey, Greece, Latvia, Poland and the Ukraine integrated with the Portuguese students, several of whom were from the former Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique, and a few who had been born and raised in English-speaking countries, contributing great diversity of worldview to the classroom community.

Students showed various levels of expertise in English. Those who had been raised, or had spent a good deal of time, in the countries where English is the primary language (US, Britain, New Zealand and Canada) used a casual fluency in their written expression. This fluency, however, did not necessarily translate to more interesting or reflective writing. Several of the Erasmus students whose written English was less polished, nevertheless were able to project intense thoughts and feelings. At times the roughness of the language added power to the effect of the expression, as it does in this brief quote by Elif K., whose mother tongue is Turkish: “If I am wanted to write a poem right now, I believe I can write. If someone wanted me to create a melody, I could absolutely create it. I believe creativity is so much related with the light of the hope. If you do not lose it, you can give birth to new things.”

Since language is intimately connected with identity and culture, we embarked on an inquiry regarding student language preferences when writing autobiographical pieces. Surprisingly, three-quarters of the students preferred writing such narratives in English rather than in their first language. Several explained that their music, television and films are in English giving them vocabulary and phrasing expressive of current social and cultural experiences. This ease of expression comes, paradoxically, along with a bit of distance that keeps their most intimate feelings out of reach; their privacy can remain intact: “Writing in Portuguese is like presenting myself to court; I have written down my deepest feeling and secrets, things that I was taught to keep to myself in a language that they will now understand” (Mariana V.).

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The course syllabus approached the complex field of autobiography by combining several threads of inquiry and practice, as noted above.

Students (1) read excerpts of life stories, (2) analyzed practically-oriented theoretical essays and (3) wrote their own autobiographical pieces, often stimulated by readings and discussion.

I selected autobiographical pieces that were well written, interesting to read, and by noted writers whose work exemplified or demonstrated a variety of strategies for 'writing the self'. We saw how Virginia Woolf uses fiction to convey the 'truths' of her childhood; how Jamaica Kincaid integrates her life story with that of her colonized Caribbean homeland; how Raymond Carver writes about himself in what seems to be a biographical piece about his father; how Bob Dylan uses historical information to give substance to his lyrics; how Paule Marshall finds poetic inspiration in the Creole language of her mother's working class friends.

Students participated vigorously in discussions, often bringing forth unexpected points or readings of our text. For example, Charles Reis Felix's mixed bio/autobiography about himself and his immigrant father's life in New Bedford, Massachusetts, was particularly attractive for students who could see aspects of their own parents and grandparents sketched out in Joe Felix. After a student dramatization of a dialogue between Joe and his wife, students knowingly agreed that the couple sounded just like their grandparents. That association led to discussion and writings about their families, which they described as religious, hard-working, loyal and resistant to change.

Many responded energetically to Jeanette Winterson's memoir, which brought to light what could have remained secret stories of dysfunction at home. Winterson's mother, a religious fundamentalist who was sure she had adopted her daughter 'from the wrong crib', forbids Jeanette from reading, abuses the father and makes life at home barely bearable. Students marveled at Winterson's disclosure of her own anger, of her capacity for violence and of her sexual awakening, while noting the honesty and abrupt, unsentimental style of her writing. From Winterson's writing about the trials of her childhood, students took courage to discuss some of the difficulties in their own homes, though always apologetic and forgiving of the neglectful father, the silent mother, the poverty of family nurturance.

Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoir of a Boy Soldier* generated an intense discussion taking students well out of their comfort zone to read about a young man who, at the age of twelve, is caught in rebel warfare in his native Sierra Leone. During our discussion of Beah's story, Gil S., a thoughtful and poetic young man, stood up to his full tallness and asked a question central to the students' work: "How can I write about such minor things as an argument with my girlfriend or my grandmother's cooking when that young man has been through so much of such importance.

He’s seen his village burned, his friends beaten and himself taken in by government soldiers and become a killer. How can I feel my trivial life has anything of interest or importance?”

Here was the nut of the issue. How can students feel that an account of their family life or work life or transportation troubles has meaning for anyone, even for themselves? Here too came the caveat about the writing of an ordinary life: the writing must tell us why the story it tells matters. As a reader, I need to know why I should care about the personal narrative I’m reading. Many events in our ordinary lives are, in themselves, unexceptional. They are indeed rather ho-hum, but it is in the writing that we feel the presence of the writer, the ‘graph’ of the self. Yes, the story we tell may be somewhat interesting. More importantly, it is how we reflect and provide a context for these accounts of otherwise mundane events that animates the writing and conveys meaning, which makes the story, our story, their stories, matter.

Complementing the reading of life stories, we explored theoretical ideas to give background to our study. Since students had almost no experience with the genre, and since my overall purpose was to engage them in their own writing, I decided to minimize required study of the history and evolution of autobiography theory and its nuanced interrogations. Rather, I set out in introductory lectures the basic issues comprising the theoretical field (some noted above: “the relation of fact and fiction as they play out in autobiographical narrative, the shifting ‘centers’ and ‘margins’ of the canon, the role of memory in the construction of identity and the role of language in projections of self”) and further developed the issues as they suggested themselves in the readings and in our classroom discussions.

I had hoped the readings and subsequent analyses of texts would bring up theoretical issues organically, from their reading and written work, and supply students with some techniques for such written expression. I chose obliquely theoretical pieces to acquaint students with an array of critical considerations and to provide suggestions regarding the writing of memoir. Practically oriented essays by well-known scholars in the field set forth various strategies for life-story writing to keep the writer and reader engaged in the work. Through this integration of practice and theory, students gained comfort developing their own content and an astuteness in discerning larger issues latent in their stories.

The chapter “Life Narrative” in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s *Reading Autobiography* provided students with references to many autobiographical works and the conceptual points derived from their study. Excerpts from Smith and Watson offered guides for both reading and writing life narratives. We discussed such topics as agency, authority

and authenticity (235–237), ethics, evidence and experience (241–242), memory (245) and voice (250), among the sections in Smith and Watson’s “Tool Kit” for reading life stories. The introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay* by Phillip Lopate added a different kind of specificity to the array of writerly considerations. Though Lopate acknowledges the paradox of trying to write honestly about oneself and at the same time understanding that “humans are incorrigibly self-deceiving, rationalizing animals” (xxv), he nevertheless offers strategies for writing with “deeper levels of honesty” (xxv) and self-reflection. He advises us to “interrogat[e] our ignorance” (xviii), to keep present both the intelligent narrator of today along with the consciousness of times past, to write conversationally, to use dialogue, and to offer one’s vulnerability as a source of self-knowledge. We saw how the authors we read showed vulnerability, how we knew of their honesty and where they went deeply into self-exploration.

And finally, student writing. Students wrote regularly in and out of class. They wrote in class once a week responding to my prompts, for example, about an important family moment:

But that Thursday has no music and no sound. It is one of the quietest days in memory...A few weeks after her death, I felt like I needed to pay my homage to my grandmother. Somehow we always feel the need to honor those who are gone, as if that will bring them back, or maybe it is our way to say what hasn’t been said and do what hasn’t been done. Me, I just wanted to sing her something. I wanted to make my own little funeral and honor her in my way. So I played Verdi’s Requiem, my favorite requiem of all time and the first classical masterpiece I ever sang.”

-Maria Beatriz V. T.

...or home:

Although I enjoy the quiet life and the fresh air, I never really felt at home. I remember being really young, even before I went to elementary school, going into a frenzy to gather my things in a blue bag and saying to myself ‘I want to run away.’ I do not remember why, just that I wanted to go. As I grew up I found a lot of reasons to run away or just move out, but I still cannot explain that memory. Were my parents fighting at the time? Perhaps. Was it because, at the time, my father would go away because of work and I, in my innocence, wanted to go too? Or was it because I already felt trapped because I was already a strong willed child and no one could see that?

-N. M.

...or friendships:

I lived a happy, sheltered life until 1974. I was young and happy. I lived in an enormous family. I went to school where I had all the right friends. My friends all had the right surnames. We had the Espírito Santos, for instance, who are now the main Portuguese bankers; the Caetanos, the Thomaz's, family of our former Governors; yes, everybody who was anybody was my friend. Politics were not on our agenda. We didn't know anything about it; we didn't care either. Life went on smoothly. No problems. Nothing. I was happy. We went to parties, to the beach, we laughed, we talked, we danced, we drank, we smoked, we flirted; we were young and happy.

-Vera M. R.

Or they'd make their choice from the vast array of topics that generated from our readings. Writing in class for half an hour or more helped students to gain comfort and familiarity with the writing process and began to alert them to 'centers of gravity' in their own works. These centers are places where the writing comes alive, where they say something honest, authentic and worth exploring further.

My father suffered a lot in life, we all do, but the difference was that he died each time he had to overcome a great loss, and that burdened him more than the joys life gave him. When leaving Angola I remember his eyes looking at me as if they were pleading me not to go and at the same time urging me to become a greater man than him, not to make the same mistakes he did. His eyes were like a large river, they were calm, deep and still and they could become rapids in a split second, trembling with uncertainty and pouring tears as if they were waterfalls, that was something loathsome, see my own father cry, my pillar of strength, the man I thought was a rock, because if he cried like a child then what was I?

-Roberto T.

The in-class pieces often served as inspiration for the more formal, lengthy and complex narratives, which students presented in a final 'collage of self', the culminating course project successfully completed by 59 students.

Engaged in an introductory experience of autobiographic complexities, the University of Lisbon students deepened their thinking as they unwound narratives of self-in-the-past to thread new stories of self-in-the-present-and-future. They came to know the sound of their own voices on the page as well as to hear the voices of others, developed vigor in such self-presentation and went off with a great deal of presence to themselves, and with any luck, to their larger society. I still receive emails from students, telling of music they listen to, poems they've written, demonstrations

they've attended, as they are alert to new energies of integration between themselves and their world.

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"I think I have stripped down all my fears and I feel ready to tell the story of who I am, even the unauthorized version."

-Mariana V.

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NOTES

- 1 Ana Raquel N., a student in my class, titled her portfolio “Memory to Ink.” I’ve taken the liberty of using her term.
- 2 Though distinctive and distinguished in the literature, the terms “autobiography”, “memoir”, “life story writing” and sometimes even “personal narrative” occur interchangeably in this essay.
- 3 Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck’s work on women’s autobiographies figured significantly in my thinking about the lives of people on the margins of their societies. Brodzki, Bella and Celeste Schenck, eds. *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women’s Autobiography*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988.
- 4 The passage is translated by Ana Cristina Gil in her article “Cultural Identity and Globalization.”
- 5 A technique that evolved from early work on enhancing student writing, free writing presumes a connection between spoken and written English. (We took up the issue of free writing in Portuguese later in the course. Results of this study are not within the scope of the current essay.) The liberties and ease of spoken language can influence writing, which often ‘chokes up’ by the blankness of the page. Students are asked to write for 10 minutes by the clock, not to lift their pens from the paper (or their fingers from the keyboard) and simply write. If they find themselves stuck, they are to write “I have nothing to write, I have nothing to write” until something else comes out of the pen—and it does! They are instructed that no one will read the work, that they need not attend to grammar or spelling and may move from one idea to another. After two sessions of such writing, students write with greater ease and honesty. See Peter Elbow’s *Writing Without Teachers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.

Finally, there are the writing exercises – the keystone of the whole course, in my opinion. Never before had a course made me write so much. I’ve taken to doing regular free writing exercises at home which have been replacing the short notes I used to keep. Nowadays, I tend not to postpone my writing and try to tackle the thing while it’s still alive.

–Fábio G

- 6 Lessa notes José Gil’s term “non-inscription” in Gil’s book, *Portugal, Hoje: O Medo de Existir*. Lisboa: Relógio d’Água, 2004, not yet translated into English.
- 7 See *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes, London: Macmillan, 1988 and Gertrude Stein’s

Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas. New York: Vintage, 1990. Virginia Woolf is early in her radical approach to autobiography: “Effectively liberating herself from the conventional (auto)biographer’s need to represent the life of an actual person, Virginia Woolf writes the original and subversive ‘autograph’ *The Waves*. Placing the processes of literary creation at the heart of her text, Woolf writes the story not of her own life – a personal autobiography – but the ‘life’ and retelling of the life of her text – a ‘textual autobiography.” Zucker, Marilyn Slutzky. “Virginia Woolf’s Textual Autobiography: *The Waves*.” diss. Stony Brook University, 1990. DAI, Ann Arbor, MI, 1991 51-10.

- 8 My conversational knowledge of Portuguese prevents me from reading texts or critical works in that language. Students, on the other hand, had great expressive competence in English.