

Norman, R. (December 2002). Autobiography in/as Re-search and Pedagogy: Writing, Reading and Considering Women's Lives. Educational Insights, 7(2). [Available: <http://www.csci.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v07n02/contextualexplorations/norman/>]

Autobiography in/as Re-search and Pedagogy: Writing, Reading and Considering Women's Lives

**Renee Norman with Danielle Arsenault, Renee Cohen, Veronica Gaylie,
Hartej Gill, Paige Hansen Davis, Liisa House, Sylvia Wilson**

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As I reconnect with my writing self/selves, my autobiographical self/selves, I listen in the fridge hum of the kitchen for my current thoughts, try to burrow deep below the detritus of marking, final course grades, upcoming course outlines, through to the persona who contemplates, writes about, reflects upon matters other than the everyday concerns and politics of teaching in the academy. I am writing at the kitchen table. This is both my office and my refuge. Outside the window, a light rain brushes the branches of still-bare trees, promising spring. They sway slightly in the wind, or is it me who moves? My dog lies patiently by my feet, a black furry muse, a silent psychic presence. This is where I plan my courses, mark and tally, and gather myself when I feel I am fracturing into pieces. All evidence of the paper flurry that accompanies the end of term is reduced to my journal, my pen, and a neat stack of poetry and prose written not by me, but by the women in the autobiography course I taught.

It is an irony that the busyness of this life leaves little space for my own thought and writing. As I encouraged others to write and made a place for autobiography, I could not seem to make much of a place for mine.

But now at long last I write, and find beneath the layers, all this:

Bank Statement for a Dead Father on a Cheque

iamwritingthisonthebackofachequetheonlypapericouldfind
 inthecarwaitingoutsidetheschoolfordaughters
 thishastobeasmallpoem
 noroomforthefightwithmysister
 she'sdoingtoomuchforourmotherandresentsme
 thishastobetinyroomforresiduemourning
 adeadfathermychildhoodhomesoldcalgarysummersmemories
 likecancelledchequesthishastobeshorthand
 needtosaybasis
 likeBLBST'SPTRYwithoutVWLS
 headlinersMDLFSKSbut
 hey'i'malive
 huntingforpiecesofpapersshortpoems
 waitingifillchequeswithwords
 waitingforthepaintosubside
 waitingfordaughters
 nopaperonlyallthis



*And longing for your glance,
 But you look the other way*

As I continue trying to make sense of my father's death, as I witness my mother's difficult transition to widowhood, as I mourn the sale of my childhood home, I temporarily set aside my distress and re-read the incredible autobiographical writing that the women in the course have written. And my anguish is distilled in the tears I weep as I read their heartfelt words about parents with Alzheimer's, about leaving family and country for brave new wor(l)ds where they feel like outsiders, about living as women between the hybrid places of ethnicity, daughter/father/mother/ relations, disabled children, surgery, childhood trauma and illness, and silences. Always silences, that break sound barriers if only we could hear them with the echo vision of bats, with the clairvoyance of soothsayers, with the grace of angels. And as my distress is distilled into women's tears, I recall the line from the Talmud that I heard in a movie: God counts women's tears. I hope she is counting ours. I feel such a connection between the powerful words written by these women, whom I am encouraging to write, and the words I write as I read and feel the words they are writing.

found		she began to speak	
Paige Hansen Davis			
maybe mom was a feminist		goddess	
Liisa House			
berry crumble	alphabet roulette	writer exposed	
Renee Cohen			
yellow mask	laugh, Medusa laugh	response to faces	

During the course we read and discussed "House of Mirrors," my book on women's autobiographical writing in/as re-search, as well as other autobiographical writings by women authors such as bell hooks, Elizabeth Smart, Zoe Landale, Mary McCarthy. The students wrote autobiographical journals and episodes in response to their own lives as well as the textual lives they read about in the books. More layers!

Veronica Gaylie
a weaving

Some of the women were inspired to write and share poems for the first time, they said, though I think that they already had so much poetry with/in them. (They ARE poems.) I was astounded by the intertextual connections between my words, theirs, and the time we spent together.

*Perhaps it is in the doing that we find
(our)selves when we feel lost, in the doing
that we lose (our)selves so something can be*



I'm alone in the silence

Sylvia Wilson

getting lost . . .

Because we were exploring the ethical issues of autobiographical writing in re-search, as well as the way in which we construct our lives through our words, I asked them to follow up an episode they wrote by approaching those whom they wrote about, to get other views and perspectives, to complicate the original writing by considering the many complexities of how we see ourselves, how we see others, how others see us, and how others perceive how we see them.

Hartej Gill

imposed ignorance

How can we consider such autobiographical writings in/as re-search?

Autobiographical writing can be turned over and over, looking back at itself reflexively. For example, I wrote about my two miscarriages in four poems, a scene, and an article published in the newspaper. Mirrors that evoke and displace this event. Or we can position the writing so it is doubled on the page, one side mirroring the other so that the writing, the meanings, turn. (For example, in the Hannah section of my dissertation, I place 13 meditative and poetic reflections with and against theo-poetic writing. In the Martha section, framed pages act as paper mirrors that reflect back my musings). Even the same poem placed in different contexts, a turning over of sorts, causes us to re-read and re-think the writing. The way we have re-arranged pieces of our texts here is yet another example of how our writing can be turned over and over. And this re-arrangement adds to the re-reading, the re-writing, the re-turning.

Such writing and analysis constitute autobiography in/as re-search, the additional preposition "in" floating back and forth across a backslash and highlighting both the movement and the turning as well as what is in-between autobiography and re-search.

Veronica Gaylie

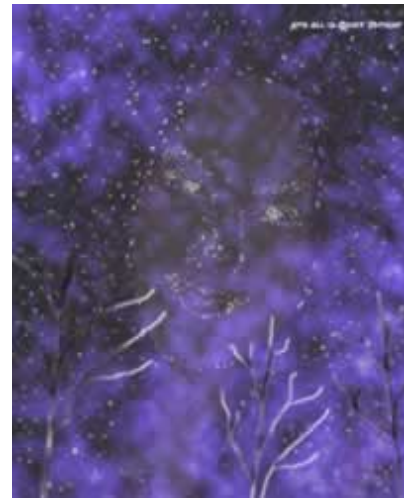
autobiography is . . .

All the women in the course wrote in some way or another about the hidden, about silences, and these silences began to speak by our acknowledgement of the unsaid, the unspeakable, the in between. Most of the writings were about or involved relationships: children, mothers, fathers, partners...But this theme was played out very differently across cultures, across sexualities, across languages, across ethnicities.

The Hidden

their eyes say it all
how they put words to memories
find warmth in the stark act
of writing selves

their I's say it all
how hungry they've become
for putting self first
feeding on stories
the satisfaction of the unspeakable
transformed to a thundering din



Sara Norman

And all is quiet tonight

All the women writers/autobiographers chose what they wrote about out of desire and deep interest, what troubled or fascinated them, what their re-search entailed. Some chose to deal with painful or intimate details by distancing through devices and conventions such as allegorical stories or found poems. While this distance protected all of us into the emotions connected to events, the writing remained powerful and evocative, while avoiding the tell-all discomfort of confessional disclosure. Those who wrote more openly about a father, a lover, a mother, a child, maintained an integrity that involved honour, compassion, ethical motives, but a clear desire to tell a story that needed to be told. What some women did not dare put into words, they included with photographs. What some women did not put into words, they included with artwork, a vital part of their autobiographical re-presentation.



Sara Norman

*It's Truly
Winter again*

my husband says he will sue me if I publish that piece
Myra tells me over the phone
thanks me for my support
ensures I'll pick up the special candy
she's putting in my mail box on Monday
she wants to meet in two weeks
bring me another of her delicious cakes
I sample her imported recipes and longings

Angela mails me rice delights
writes she is back in Taiwan
returning soon
emails me poems to read
and her gratitude for a reference letter
I do not refer to loneliness

Tanya brings a beautiful plant
we laugh because I suggest Chukovsky
for her essay
did not know her Russian heritage
as if I breathed the Ukraine in the air
from her pores

the generosity of these women
is humbling
food and plants the offerings
that taste of otherness
but level difference as their fragrance
wafts hope, friendship, love



My Face Wet With Tears

At our final gathering we read aloud some of our work, an emotional and celebratory event. At least four women openly cried, a chain reaction that had all of us close to tears at times, a response to the strength and power of our wor(l)ds, finally committed to paper and entered into the atmosphere. A meeting of Autobiographers Anonymous (only we were not so anonymous)! We, the members, stood up, disclosed some facet of our lives, finding support and agency in the collective autobiographical intent of the group.

Anonymous

wrote a lot of poems
afraid to pen ownership
the danger of disclosure
perhaps a husband lurking nearby
or a father
overseeing the Truth
rewritten by a thousand nameless women
their faces in the letters



*When Cold does its part
And You Break my heart*

Danielle Arsenault

as i attempt to write the meaning and magic of this course. . .

About the Author

Renee Norman is a poet, writer, and teacher with an interest in women's autobiographical writings. Her book, *House of Mirrors*, was published by Peter Lang, NY in 2001. Her poetry, stories, and articles have appeared in numerous literary and academic journals and in newspapers. She has 3 artistic daughters who are a rich source for writing.

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About the Artist

Sara Norman is a student at the University of BC interested in writing, film, and graphic art. She writes poetry, newspaper columns, and posts her computer graphic artwork and poetry on her website (www.geocities.com/saradnorman). Sara was a guest columnist for a year for the *Now* newspaper in Coquitlam. Her writing is autobiographical and she finds her mother a rich source for writing.

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