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Prospectus Abstract:

Mothers in Prison, Women's Autobiography, and Activism

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Communication Studies–Rhetoric

This dissertation is based on ten interviews conducted over one year in a Texas women's prison, focusing on stories told by a few of the growing number of incarcerated mothers. Although they have received little media attention, incarcerated mothers' stories deal with the challenges of motherhood before, during, and after incarceration, offering a nuanced picture of social and psychological contexts positioning them with unrealistic social norms. The sum of their experience -- real and psychological -- adds up to a counter-narrative critiquing the dominant culture's ideas of what mothers "should be" and how the system fails to provide opportunities to disadvantaged parents.

My analysis of these personal narratives focuses on what happens to incarcerated mothers and to their children as a factor in the long-term development of that mother's family. That mother/child relationship is just as important as what initially brought her to the system. Utilizing theories of women's autobiography, a study of vernacular discourse, and ideological criticism I will analyze how recurrent themes in the narratives (particularly poverty, abuse, addiction, lack of education, and a desire to be an effective parent) reveals the women coping with and challenging society's myths of idealized motherhood.

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Course Title:
***Vernacular Discourse,
Women' s Autobiography, and Activism***

Course Description: This course will focus on theories of women's autobiography, vernacular discourse (discourse that emanates from a localized community), and the opportunity for civic activism evolving from the development of personal narratives. This course will be divided into theoretical and practical applications.

After completing this course students, should be able to identify unique elements to women's autobiography, understand how this understanding is related to vernacular discourse, and finally see how a focus on personal stories may later evolve into social movements. The development of female trauma narratives and a special focus on the narratives of women in crisis will be a focal point.

This course will include three units. We will begin with a local unit of vernacular discourse, which focus on the La Raza movement, which began in Crystal City, Texas in the 1970's. This social movement began with a young women being excluded from participating on the cheerleading squad because her parents had not graduated from high school. This story in many ways activated an entire community of individuals and began a social movement, which we still see working today. Texts that focus on the La Raza Movement and Oral History will be utilized in class. We may have guest speakers who were part of the initial movement.

The second unit will be an Introduction to Consciousness–Raising techniques employed in a variety of social movements including farm workers and radical feminism to name two. Speakers such as Cesar Chavez will be utilized to demonstrate the impact on social movements. Feminist personal autobiographies will be presented in

class along with readings to illustrate the role of consciousness-raising in social movements.

Finally the last unit will be a tour through popular culture and mass mediated narratives of disenfranchised people. The end result will be a development of personal narratives to present to class. As most of my students are Hispanic, first generation college students, and female I believe this course focuses very well on issue that effect their everyday lives and offer an opportunity for students to feel empowered by writing and sharing their own stories.

Rough Outline of the Course

In the first four weeks we will cover Unit 1: The La Raza Movement—One short paper of 1–2 pages in reaction to various news sources and oral histories will be required. Students will be able to choose a theme to discuss out of the issues raised in class. A short oral summary of approximately 2 minutes will also be required. Criteria for both assignments will be included in the course packet which will be available online.

The second four weeks will cover Unit 2: Radical Feminism and Consciousness Raising. One short 2–3 page paper will be required in which the students summarize and comment on the use of either consciousness raising or oral history as a component to activism. Students will be expected to utilize terms from class and find at least three readings to back up their discussion. A short oral summary of approximately 2 minutes will also be required. Criteria for both assignments will be included in the course packet which will be available online.

The third four weeks will cover Unit 4: Popular Culture, Mass Mediated Message and Disenfranchised People. In this unit the class will be assigned the task of seeking out the narratives of disenfranchised or scapegoated people presented in the media. Each person will be required to bring at minimum of three stories to class and present the story in a short oral summary to class not to last more than 2 minutes. This requirement is informal to enhance class discussion but a participation grade will be assigned for the number and quality of the stories presented to class.

The last two weeks are the culmination of the course with the class writing a short personal story to present to class. Stories about how they ended up in college will be the focus. No student is required to share uncomfortable information. The final assignment will include a manuscript of at least four pages, a presentation of approximately 5 minutes in class, and a short 3 page analysis of how the project came across to the audience they deliver their story to.

Grading and Assessment:

Assignment 1:

La Raza Movement and Vernacular Discourse Paper– 10%

Oral Presentation: 5 %

Assignment 2:

Consciousness Raising Paper– 15%

Oral Presentation: 5%

Assignment 3:

Personal Narratives and Oral Summaries 10%

Final Project:

Personal Autobiography 10%

(3 drafts will be collected before the final version)

Performance of Autobiography 10%

Analysis of performance and audience 10%

Four Unit Quizzes: 15% – lowest quiz grade will be dropped.

Participation/ Attendance: 10% – small assignments, attendance, and class discussion make up this grade

Total: 100%

NOTE: This assignment has the potential to be combined with a project started by Dr. Marie McClusky on campus to encourage local children and children in our rural borderlands area to continue their education. Currently grant money is available for costumes and travel for students who would like to share their stories at area schools.

Need Statement:

Vernacular Discourse, Women' s Autobiography, and Activism

Southwest Texas Junior College serves 13 counties in the Texas/Mexico Border Region of Texas with campuses in Uvalde, Del Rio, Eagle Pass, and Crystal City. Few interdisciplinary courses are offered at SWTJC and many students are unaware of the rich history of the area and how they may have benefited from the efforts of some unknown local personalities.

Because this course focuses on the power of the spoken word and many of our students only have access to developing speaking skills through a required speech course, small speaking assignments will be required along with writing assignments throughout the semester.

This course could be offered as a sophomore level English writing class, a theater course, a secondary speech elective, or a humanities course. As our students are on the Texas/Mexico border region I believe a course like this would provide an opportunity for students to challenge the notion that only certain stories are worth telling. As most students are Hispanic, female, first generation college students and parents telling their stories of breaking through and actually making it to college could be inspirational to other students.

A possible grant might be utilized to develop this course and maybe the stories could be presented at local high schools as encouragement to other students who may not know that college is an option for them. This course does have a writing component and could be listed as a course in the humanities. This course could fulfill the elective Humanities requirement.

Sample Class Activity

In this class we have been focusing on the basic elements of vernacular discourse, or discourse that emanates from a localized community. To gain a better understanding of how vernacular discourse functions I will assign the following project to begin our in depth class discussion.

- 1) Reading through magazines, newspapers, books, or electronic media please locate 3 alternative narratives to the dominant story told in the media about a scapegoated or denigrated group.
- 2) Current examples might be welfare mothers, crack babies, drug addicts, criminals, Palestinians, and so on. The idea is not to celebrate the group necessarily for being held out as an example of what is wrong with society but to see if another story is being downplayed and if hearing another version might illuminate other disparities.
- 3) Write a short summary of your findings approximately 1–2 typed– pages in length and describe what you learned about the terms: scapegoating, vernacular discourse, theories of autobiography, and whether you have a different opinion about the scapegoated group you identified after identifying alternative narratives.
- 4) We will discuss the various findings in class to bring together the content of the semester. Students will be expected to discuss their findings and comment on the findings of their classmates.