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Women Shaping Their World: An Honors Colloquium

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Because gender maintains a significant influence on our education, careers, decision-making, families, and everyday lives, honors programs that wish to explore issues of social justice and equality should include coursework that illuminates historical and contemporary issues from a gendered perspective. In spring 2011, the South Dakota State University Honors Program offered an innovative three-credit honors colloquium entitled “Women Shaping Their World.” This multidisciplinary course focused on examining the ways that women’s lives are structured in cultural, social, religious, economic, historical, political, and scientific contexts; it also explored the potential of women to transcend these barriers and shape their own lives. The colloquium attracted honors students from a wide variety of majors and offered them unique academic and personal opportunities. The three professors who taught the course hope to offer ideas for honors administrators and faculty members who wish to develop classes highlighting women’s studies. In order to suggest possibilities for other honors programs, we explain how our class was designed and implemented and how its various facets—including guest speakers, texts, assignments, and poster presentations—worked together to meet the course objectives.

THE IDEA TAKES SHAPE

(JULIE M. BARST, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH)

At SDSU, the honors educational experience requires students to take at least one multidisciplinary honors colloquium focused on a topic of contemporary interest. Faculty associated with the women’s studies program first proposed the idea of offering a colloquium highlighting women’s studies early in spring 2010, and several professors from various disciplines expressed interest in designing, teaching, and/or guest lecturing in the course. Timothy Nichols, Dean of the SDSU Honors College, chaired a subcommittee of these professors that met once a month for the two semesters leading up to the implementation of the colloquium. During these meetings, Dr. Nichols and the committee brainstormed possible texts, assignments, guest speakers, and course goals. In fall 2010, Julie D. Lane and I were chosen to team-teach the course, and we designed the course goals and student outcomes, narrowing down the texts and

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assignments from a multitude of useful suggestions. We committed to a strong multidisciplinary content, believing, as Kathleen Black writes in *Honors in Practice*, that a strong honors program should encourage students to “see the commonalities as well as the distinctions among disciplines,” helping them become less likely “to isolate themselves within their own particular major” (197). Therefore, because Lane and I had expertise in the fields of English, political science, and women’s studies, we scheduled guest speakers who could bring their gender-related expertise, wisdom, and experiences into the classroom in other fields of study such as health, agriculture, art, and religion.

In addition, we incorporated a final course project that required students to build upon the major concepts and themes of the course by exploring the ways they (or a woman they know) have shaped their world; this project was a creative nonfiction essay directed by Christine Stewart-Nuñez, Assistant Professor of English, who specializes in creative writing. Accordingly, we scheduled four class visits during the semester in which Stewart-Nuñez would introduce the expectations of the assignment, guide the students by examples and in-class discussion, and answer any questions they posed about this genre.

After many fruitful discussions about desired student outcomes, Lane and I determined that during our course honors students would:

- enhance written and oral communication skills, accomplished via short papers and an oral presentation;
- enhance creative and artistic expression, accomplished via a creative writing project and a poster presentation that incorporates both visual and oral elements;
- demonstrate an understanding of some basic concepts of feminist theory, accomplished via class discussions and short essays;
- become familiar with the gendered contexts through which women’s lives are shaped, accomplished via exposure to feminist theoretical perspectives and application of these perspectives to course readings;
- enhance awareness of the challenges women encounter in other cultures, accomplished via reading three texts that draw on this theme and various written responses to the texts;
- increase their understanding of the interconnections between gender and race, accomplished via reading three texts that draw on this theme and written responses to the texts, and
- relate their own experiences to those of women in other cultures, accomplished via writing a comparative reflection essay on a text and giving a presentation on a woman who is a member of a different identity group.

Our achievement of these goals and outcomes took place in the context of our guest lectures, the course texts and related assignments, and the culminating project for the class, a creative nonfiction assignment.

CONTEXTS: GUEST SPEAKERS SHARE THEIR EXPERTISE (JULIE D. LANE, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE)

In order to bring attention to the variety of ways that gendered constructs influence women's lives, we brought in speakers who highlighted women's issues within their diverse disciplines and careers. We asked them to identify the barriers that women encounter and to address the areas of potential for women to transcend these barriers. Ideally, our sessions would have included more speakers representing the sciences and mathematics, but we faced some constraints in availability as well as weather-related problems. For instance, we had scheduled a presentation on the roles of women in contemporary agriculture with guest speaker Linda Hasselstrom, a South Dakota rancher and writer, but the visit was canceled due to a blizzard.

In one speaker session, we focused on women and art. Leda Cempellin, Assistant Professor of Art at SDSU, gave a visual presentation on Artemesia Gentileschi, an Italian artist of the post-Renaissance era. Students responded to the ways Gentileschi visually represented rape in stark contrast to representation by the predominant male artists of the era. Cempellin also introduced the work of contemporary artist Nina Paley, an award-winning animator and filmmaker. We viewed two of Paley's animated films, *Sita Sings the Blues* and *The Stork*, and Cempellin led a question-answer session with the artist via Skype. From her home in New York, Paley responded to students' questions on topics ranging from her political statements on reproduction and copyright law to choices she had made in her career and personal relationships. Paley advised our students to "follow their bliss" and to remember that there is "nothing worth doing that won't upset some people." Our students were impressed with Nina Paley's creative endeavors and responded positively to her intelligence, wit, spirit, and confidence to pursue her passions in spite of obstacles.

In a session on history, students further explored representations of women through art. April Brooks, Professor of History at SDSU, presented a visual lecture on women in the eighteenth century. Brooks interjected humor into her discussion of William Hogarth's *Gin Lane* and *Beer Street* (1751) and explored Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's unique fashion choices. Brooks suggested that fashion was often the only means of expression available to a woman during the period, and she highlighted the importance of the legal status of a married woman, whose designation as a *feme covert* meant that she had no independent legal identity and was instead subsumed under the identity of her husband.

Anne Marie Bahr, Professor of Religious Studies at SDSU, was our guest for the session on religion. In preparation for class, students read selections from Megan McKenna's *This Will Be Remembered of Her: Stories of Women Reshaping Their World*. The readings highlighted the efforts of three remarkable women working toward peace in the Middle East, each from a different faith:

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Hanan Ashrawi, a Palestinian Christian; Lynn Gottlieb, an American Jewish rabbi; and Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian Muslim. Bahr fielded the many questions our students had about Islam that emerged from our ongoing discussions of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, one of the major course texts, and she also led a thought-provoking discussion on the presence of women as priests and ministers in a variety of religions.

In a session on literature, Sharon Palo, Assistant Professor of English, brought in the poem “The Reasons that Induced Dr. S to Write a Poem call’d The Lady’s Dressing Room,” written by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in 1734. Palo led the class through a deconstruction of the poem, highlighting the biting satire Montagu presents in response to Jonathan Swift’s “The Lady’s Dressing Room” (1732). Palo guided the students through Montagu’s poem, giving particular emphasis to the distinction between the objective and subjective points of view and to the seeming neutrality underlying the narrator’s “objectivity” that disguises a gendered point of view subordinating women.

Another class explored body image. We had two guest speakers from the SDSU Wellness Center for this class session: Debra Johnson, the Clinical Counseling Supervisor, and Brenda Anderson, Head Nurse Practitioner. We first watched the video *Killing Us Softly 3: Advertising’s View of Women*. The film argues that most of the images of women presented in the mass media, particularly in advertising, are sexist. Our speakers facilitated a discussion of the video, drawing in their own experiences in working with young women and men and the problems with body image they encounter. The speakers highlighted the importance of maintaining personal health, particularly with respect to nutrition and exercise.

Women and politics was the last topic in the series. Our guest for this session was Stephanie Herseth-Sandlin, who served as South Dakota’s sole representative to the U.S. Congress for two terms. She spoke about her history in politics and the particular challenges she encountered, and she answered student questions about gender discrimination and related issues. Her presentation also highlighted balancing family and a political career and how this uniquely affects women. In addition, she discussed her efforts to address problems of poverty and intimate violence on American Indian reservations. The class concluded with a discussion about why so few women hold political office and what can be done to facilitate and encourage women to seek positions of political leadership.

One of the greatest advantages of the interdisciplinary colloquium format was that it enabled us to consider the impact of gendered constructs on all facets of women’s (and men’s) lives. The series of speakers was a key element in enabling us to identify commonalities in challenges that women encounter across time and place and in different social and political contexts. In particular, the series highlighted the common struggles of women in entering traditionally “masculine” arenas of art, literature, and politics. The series also helped us to achieve one of our most important course objectives: to enhance

awareness of the challenges that women face in other cultures. The speakers gave us the opportunity to focus on gender-related issues that women have encountered across cultures and time periods, including post-Renaissance Italy, contemporary American Indian communities, eighteenth-century Britain, and the present-day Middle East. They also inspired our students to think outside of their own culture and life experience in selecting subjects for their poster presentations.

**CONTEXTS:
COURSE MATERIALS AND ISSUES OF GENDER
(JULIE M. BARST AND JULIE D. LANE)**

Choosing texts for this course was especially difficult given the many suggestions offered by our colleagues during the planning stages as well as the wide variety of women- or gender-related novels, creative nonfiction, poetry, and prose available. The process required a significant amount of research and reading, but we finally settled on three main texts: *GirlDrive: Crisscrossing America, Redefining Feminism* by Nona Willis Aronowitz and Emma Bee Bernstein, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* by Asar Nafisi, and *Home* by Larissa Behrendt. We supplemented these texts with articles, essays, poems, and other short pieces.

***GIRLDRIVE* (2009)**

We chose *GirlDrive: Crisscrossing America, Redefining Feminism* because the authors, women about the same age as our honors students, offer invaluable perspectives on some of the most significant issues of our course: they interrogate the word “feminism” and analyze what it means to be a “feminist” in today’s society; they travel throughout the country conducting interviews with a wide variety of women (and men) who offer their points of view on feminism, the status of gender relations, and their personal experiences related to gender issues; and they do so in a fresh and accessible manner. The photographs of interviewees provide faces to accompany the important voices within the text and offer readers an opportunity to see these women and men in their own meaningful surroundings. The provocative interviews capture the wide variety of races, ethnicities, sexual identities, class positions, and religious affiliations of the interviewees, allowing readers to contemplate how gender issues intersect with these other facets of identity in significant and sometimes unsettling ways.

Although we did not require a written assignment to accompany *GirlDrive*, class discussions and group activities focused on many of the issues raised in the text. We asked students to read the first half of the text before our first class period, and we began that session by asking if we still need women’s studies courses like this one, and, if so, why. We also inquired about the students’ knowledge of feminism and feminist theory, and we presented some historical

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and contemporary contexts to women's issues as well as a basic overview of feminist theory. Lane offered some statistics from the "Benchmarking Women's Leadership" report published by The White House Project in 2009, which highlights the continuing wage gap as well as inequalities in leadership positions in most fields. Lane also discussed political underrepresentation, victimization, and other gender-related disparities that persist. We then began a more concrete discussion of *GirlDrive*. Students were eager to discuss the context, motivation, and goals for the authors' road trip across the country and what feminism means to them. They agreed with the authors that the term "feminism" has negative connotations and that, as a result, people (especially young people) can be reticent or anxious about self-identifying as feminists. Then we formed small groups and asked each to choose two interviews and discuss the following questions: What interests you about this person's opinion? Are your own beliefs about feminism similar to or different from this woman's or man's? How do you think her class, age, religious beliefs, race, sexual orientation, geographical location, or other facets of her identity influence her beliefs about feminism? How do you think those factors influence *your* beliefs?

We also discussed provocative issues raised in the text about women who work for or operate companies within the pornography or burlesque industries; body image, including among differently abled women; women who identify with various religious traditions or no religion at all and their views about women's roles; and the impact of class and race on women's abilities to access education and health care. We found this text especially useful for accessing our student's previous knowledge about course topics and themes, providing some background to feminist concepts, and helping students gain an understanding of the significant roles that gender plays today. We observed during group and class discussions along with short in-class writing assignments that *GirlDrive* helped our honors students achieve several learning outcomes: a broader understanding of how women's lives are structured in gendered and other contexts; an awareness of the challenges women encounter within our own nation as members of different identity groups or discourse communities; and an improved understanding of gender's connections to race, sexual orientation, religion, and other facets of identity.

READING LOLITA IN TEHRAN (2003)

In designing the colloquium, we felt that it was particularly important for students to have access to the experiences of women in other parts of the world and to be able to connect the gendered contexts of these experiences to the lives of American women. Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* highlights the lives of Nafisi and seven young women living under the totalitarian regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In 1981, Nafisi was dismissed from her position at the University of Tehran because of her refusal to wear a veil. In *Reading Lolita*, Nafisi reflects on the two years following her dismissal when she met in secret with the young women to discuss forbidden western classics. The book is

divided into four major sections highlighting the works of Vladimir Nabokov, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James, and Jane Austen. The book shows the variety of perspectives provided by Nafisi and the seven women on issues related to gender, religion, literature, politics, intimate relationships, and family.

At the beginning of our first session on this book, Lane gave a brief lecture on the political history of Iran. We then opened discussion so that the students could share insights based on thoughts that flowed from their reading of the text. As we began each of the four class sessions on *Reading Lolita*, we set aside fifteen minutes for students to write out a short list of two or three questions or comments that they might like to take up during the discussion. This process raised the level of intellectual discourse as students pondered difficult theoretical questions about oppression and subversive resistance, the role of gender and sexuality under the totalitarian Iranian regime, and the spaces for freedom that can be opened up through literature.

We also asked students to write a three-page page reflection essay, leaving room for students to respond to those aspects of the book that they found most meaningful. We placed few restrictions on the assignment, asking only that students seek parallels between their own lives and the lives of the young women in *Reading Lolita*. One student identified with Yassi's defiant character, for example, while another related Azin's experiences with personal relationships to her own. Other students thought in terms of the broader political, social, and cultural contexts that shape women's lives. One student found remarkable similarities between the ways that American and Iranian cultures restrict sexuality and regulate women's bodies. Another student pondered the ways that women can most effectively resist oppressive cultural and political forces.

Reading Lolita in Tehran provided a context in which students were able to relate their own experiences to those of women in other cultures, which was one of our course objectives. The reflection essays along with class discussions revealed thoughtful insights into the ways American culture restricts women's sexuality through, for example, the derogatory labeling of some women as "sluts" and excessive attention to women's appearance. Students also found parallels between Iranian and American women in the crucial choices that influence the course of women's lives, including whether to leave the home for an unfamiliar place with greater opportunities and whether to pursue a career or focus on family when the two are not easily reconciled. The discussions and written reflections also met a second key course objective: to enhance awareness of the challenges women encounter in other cultures. Students explored the difficulties that Iranian women encounter in their attempt to reconcile religious faith with totalitarian dictates, in the inability to express themselves in a meaningful way, and in the sexual violations and other means of bodily control that occur under the regime.

HOME (2004)

We chose *Home* by Larissa Behrendt, an Australian Aboriginal lawyer and author, because it offers another significant global and historical perspective on women's issues, this time within the genre of fiction, that would add to our honors students' understanding of gender issues while challenging them to make connections with previous course content. Before students began reading the text, Barst gave a short lecture on the history of Australia, highlighting the Stolen Generations of Australia, the half-caste Aboriginal children who were forcibly removed from their homes between 1869 and the early 1970s; the government, believing that the full-blooded Aboriginal race would eventually die out, wanted to assimilate these children into white society and "breed out" the so-called "black blood." After removal the children were placed in boarding schools or forced to work as servants in white homes, and most were never able to return to their families. *Home* chronicles the agonizing journey of Garibooli, stolen from her family at age eleven, and then details the atrocities she suffered and the ripple effects on her children and grandchildren; it emphasizes the point that government policies such as this one have significant repercussions for generations after the process is halted. After students read the opening section of the novel, we watched the first twenty minutes of the film *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, which visually portrays the trauma of this removal policy.

Class discussion afforded opportunities for critical thinking and forging connections. Because most of our honors students had never heard of the Stolen Generations of Australia, we discussed how history is taught, including what content is taught, who decides what content is taught, and why certain elements of history and certain voices are erased from textbooks. We compared this facet of Australian history with our country's Native American history. Many students were not aware of the horrific treatment of Native American children and young adults who were forced into boarding schools and experienced the loss of their families, native languages, religions, and cultures. Our honors students offered insightful comments about the socially constricted lives of the novel's female characters across class and race boundaries, including Garibooli in her servant role at the Howard house, Frances Grainger as the head housekeeper, and Mrs. Howard as an upper-class woman with very few hobbies or interests outside of her home and husband. In contrast, the male characters enjoy more freedoms to pursue their desires. We also analyzed the meaning and definition of "home" for the various characters: home can invoke people, physical spaces, memories, associated objects, and psychological affiliations, but the idea of "home" is important to every character in the novel, white or Aboriginal, male or female.

In the associated writing assignment, a literary response essay of three to five pages, students discussed gender and other constructs within *Home*. We asked students to advance an argument about one or more of the women or men in the novel that explores how that character's gender along with one or two other facets of identity (such as race, class, or sexual orientation)

influenced the motivations, challenges, and structure of his or her world. We asked the students to incorporate elements of literary analysis—imagery, symbolism, metaphor, and other literary devices—to support their arguments. Because most of our students were not English majors, Barst gave a PowerPoint presentation that defined different literary terms and provided examples. Students applied many of these terms to our class discussions and their essays; they analyzed several different symbols in the novel such as Grigor’s camera, Frances Grainger’s maps, and the swaying grass in Candice’s story. They discussed the larger meanings and implications of these symbols in the context of Australian history, national identity, and gender/race relations.

One student, Hanna, crafted a strong essay highlighting an important theme within the text: the myriad ways that Frances Grainger, the head housekeeper for the Howards, “defines herself by her personal interactions and shapes her identity around other people, especially men.” The loss of her fiancé and two brothers in World War I, as well as the death soon afterward of both her parents, led to an identity crisis for Frances, one that can be compared to the crisis faced by Garibooli after she is stolen from her ancestral home. This similarity invites gendered comparisons across racial and class boundaries. Another student focused on the symbolism of the jade brooch given to young Garibooli (renamed Elizabeth) by her friend Xiao-ying (renamed Helen Chan), a young Chinese girl who has also suffered similar traumatic losses of identity and her sense of belonging. The honors students dug deep within this text, critically analyzing the symbols, themes, and imagery within and between the lines in order to illuminate the myriad ways that gender and other facets of identity have constructed the lives of both women and men in a global context and continue to challenge us today; these were significant student learning outcomes that we had hoped to achieve when designing the course.

CONTEXTS: INTERCONNECTIONS VIA POSTER PRESENTATIONS (JULIE D. LANE)

During the second half of the colloquium, we set aside time at the end of each class for two students to each present a visual display and explain the images associated with the display. For this assignment, students selected one particular woman (of no relation to them) and visually depicted the ways this woman has shaped her world, particularly identifying the challenges she has encountered and how she overcame them. Students selected a woman belonging to an identity group different from the student’s own and explored how racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, religious, or sexual identity, as well as gendered identity, can influence the way a woman shapes her world. Since all the students in our colloquium self-identified as white, it was important for them to explore and understand the experiences of women who face challenges in addition to gender that place them in a subordinate status.

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The students brought in fascinating biographies of a wide variety of women. Most selected women of interest to them because of their major, and therefore topics spanned disciplines. Our architecture major selected Maya Lin, the artist who designed the Vietnam War Memorial. Our nursing major highlighted the political impact of Margaret Sanger, who worked to legalize birth control. Our aeronautical engineering major gave a presentation on Elizabeth “Bessie” Coleman, the world’s first licensed African American pilot. Our music major selected German Composer Clara Schumann and highlighted her difficulties gaining recognition within the male-dominated world of music in the nineteenth century.

The primary objective of the poster assignment was for students to understand the interconnections among gender and other identities such as race, ethnicity, class, or sexual orientation. The assignment also enhanced creative expression. One student created a doll house and revealed photographs behind the “windows” as she proceeded through the presentation. Our music major supplemented his presentation with music clips in order to demonstrate how two of Clara Schumann’s compositions reflected significant changes in Schumann’s personal life. Lastly, the presentations provided a framework for students to relate their own lives to a woman from a different identity group.

RESHAPING AND RESISTANCE: THE CREATIVE NONFICTION PROJECT (CHRISTINE STEWART-NUÑEZ, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH)

The culminating project for the colloquium was a creative nonfiction essay, in which students were to draw from our explorations of gender by creating an account of the way one woman shapes her world. Some students selected themselves as the subject, and others selected a woman they know. The purpose of the creative nonfiction format was for students to work outside the confines of a traditional, highly-structured essay and play with alternative means of interpretation and expression. The creative element provided the means and the freedom for students to articulate the ways one woman navigates her life through gender-related challenges. In the following section, I use my own voice in the creative nonfiction format to describe the project.

1.

My first of four 75-minute sessions with the twelve students of the honors colloquium “Women Shaping Their World” ends after a flurry of assignment introduction. I have designed the creative nonfiction project (a genre new to all the budding engineers, doctors, and psychologists in the class—even the lone English major) to challenge students to write about themselves or a woman they know as one who shapes her world. Today, I have discussed the most salient elements of creative nonfiction: scene, dialogue, reflection, and arrangement, and I have read examples from my own work to illustrate each. I have also

explained the recursive elements of the writing process: drafting, shaping, and revision.

I use the mid-seminar break to gather my books and papers and head out the door into the dark, January night. One honors colloquium student stands at the building's railing looking out over the snow, cellphone to her ear. "We have to write an essay," I hear her say. "I've never written like this, and it seems really hard." Her voice rises with anger, and I turn away so she will feel free to continue. "I have no idea why we have to do this," she says.

Later, I will remember this moment for the way it foretold the emotional and intellectual resistances—and breakthroughs—honors students experienced in relationship to this assignment, but at the moment it reshapes the plan I have for the next three classes.

I walk carefully down the icy stairs, realizing my precarious position. As I chip away at the thin sheet of ice on my windshield, my reflection deepens. Perhaps she had not read the assignment sheet that breaks down the project's goals: to enhance written communication skills by drafting and revising a creative nonfiction piece; to develop verbal communication skills by responding to peers' drafts; to enhance creative and artistic expression by conducting research, reflecting on experiences, and developing literary scenes; and to apply knowledge of gendered contexts that shape women's lives. Even if she had read it and still felt frustrated, this student's resistance no longer surprises me. Few have ever been asked to write from personal experience in a meaningful way; for many, their education has taught them to delete the revelation of emotion in their work and to eschew the use of personal experience as evidence. Creative nonfiction often pushes students beyond their writing and emotional comfort zones, crucial work for honors students who may have already perfected the usual moves: memorize, understand, and apply. In my fifteen years of teaching, I have found that the most exciting learning happens when students discover a new source of knowledge and gain confidence in mapping new genre terrains, as students do in analyzing the texts of their own lives or the lives of someone they love.

Driving home, I plan how I will frame the next lesson. I decide to appeal to logic. One reason to write creative nonfiction in this class is that two of the books exemplify different types of creative nonfiction—a memoir in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and a journalistic hybrid in *GirlDrive*—and can serve as reference points to develop specificity and integrate research or interviews.

2.

In the next class that I visit several weeks later, students shift uneasily in their seats when I ask for a volunteer to discuss her (or his—there is one male) writing process. During the few seconds of silence, I wonder if the resistance to this assignment has spread, and I wonder if I have overestimated these students' abilities. In compressing two weeks of instruction into one class period, perhaps I expected these honors students to absorb and learn too much too fast. Then

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Tara, an engineering major, raises her hand. She reads lovely, detailed scenes about the experiences that shaped her choice to become an engineer, scenes she has analyzed through the lens of gender. As I respond to her draft verbally, many students relax in their seats; I understand that anxiety over sharing their work in class is the kind of resistance I sensed at the beginning of class. We discuss ways to strengthen Tara's writing: tighten imagery, recreate dialogue, delete one whole scene that does not seem to fit well, add another that illustrates the challenges she faces as a woman entering a male-dominated field. Most of the students nod, smile, and raise their hands to ask questions about their pieces, allowing me to springboard into lessons on imagery, dialogue, and discovery.

This emphasis on discovery—what the writer learns about her subject and herself in the writing process—supports one of the reasons creative nonfiction is an excellent method of assessment in an honors class. Writing creative nonfiction involves connection-building and meaning-making. One of the rhetorical purposes of “the essay,” in its most creative, lyric forms, is to reveal the writer's mind at work. Writer and writing scholar Brenda Miller says it provocatively: “In the lyric essay, it all shows up. The good and the bad—they jostle one another, rub shoulders, emit sparks. The stuff we try to remember, and the stuff that remembers itself” (26–27). In the second and third class sessions, I ask each student to make verbal connections among life experiences, events often separated by years, and then for homework I ask them to make connections among these experiences and the theories and stories they have read in class. “Immerse yourself in memories and details and pay attention to the tensions and lessons that bubble up,” I say. “And make this a part of your writing. In creative nonfiction, this self-analytical layer is essential.” One founder of scholarly work in the genre, Lee Gutkind, writes: “In creative nonfiction, a writer may philosophize and add insight, telling a reader what the scenes and stories being so vividly chronicled and recreated mean both to the writer and to the world” (136). As an instructor, I hope to assess student insight into their learning in the course.

3.

A more obvious emotional resistance to the writing process emerges in the third class. Jen, a student known for her activism in the Campus Women's Coalition, wants to talk about her essay's structure, a topic she had brought up in the second class but had seemed too unnerved to read aloud. She had backed down. “I'll come to your office hours,” she said. But she did not. Now, when she raises her hand, the poise I normally associate with this articulate scientist/student/activist is complicated by a nervous rush of energy: the way she sits on the edge of her chair, the straightness of her back, and, when she speaks, the slight tremor in her voice. “I'm worried about flow. How all my scenes fit together—if, indeed, all my scenes fit.”

“Okay. We can resolve those issues,” I say. “Let’s project the piece onto the wall.” I lean over and turn the document camera on.

“Ummm.” Jen still refuses to put her writing up, but she agrees to explain it. I recognize this resistance, but I assume it stems from perfectionism—a trait shared by most of these honors students, a trait I have in common with them. I stand at the whiteboard, marker in hand, and take notes as she outlines each scene: her first moments in Spain learning to navigate the language, her grandmother’s deathbed, and the moment she begins to question her faith. I take a step back. Jen has chosen to write about tough, emotion-filled events, moments that, at first glance, seem disconnected. Yet I trust Jen’s intuition about how they all reveal her world being shaped. The common element tying them together surfaces. “Jen,” I say. “I don’t know if you notice this, but loss ties each of these moments together: the loss of faith, language, a loved one.” Jen sits back in her chair and sighs as if she had not considered this possibility, and then she continues to talk through each segment, reflecting on how these *losses* shaped her world. When she gets to the scene of her grandmother’s death, she begins to cry.

The process of writing creative nonfiction elicits emotions by allowing for the expression of emotional complexity and contradiction, as Jen’s experience illustrates. Creative nonfiction can follow the messiness of thought-in-process, especially as students rework and revise their attitudes and ideas. Brenda Miller and her collaborator, Suzanne Paola, write: “We make sense of the world and we do this through story. Writing from memory and personal experience takes this natural process one step further and problematizes it, since you have now chosen to make public what is more often a highly private, almost invisible act” (32). Over and over, students in my classes choose to make these invisible acts visible because they want to understand themselves better and rarely get the opportunity in their academic lives. The intellectual potential of creative nonfiction lies in the way it demands that students account for their own stances, their own perspectives. They must analyze a particular life experience and connect it to values, ideas, and convictions; their lives become a source for data, a site for research. This process is crucial to both personal growth and the development of critical thinking; it becomes a springboard for evolving social critique. We actively move into the realm of social critique via the gate of personal experience, which is one of several learning goals for this course but one that can be neglected in the education of honors students.

4.

When Lane, Barst, and I collaborative in assessing the creative nonfiction pieces, I learn that all of the students have succeeded in accomplishing the basic aesthetic goals of the assignment (imagery, precise details, and dialogue), and I am impressed by how quickly they adapted their writing to the level of specificity and intellectual flexibility I had hoped to foster in honors students. Zach reveals how he learned from his mother to respect of the diversity of

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women's embodied experiences; Casey details her experiences tutoring English language learners; Emma portrays how her cousin persevered through painful events (some of them sexist) to become a successful graduate of medical school and how her cousin's story inspired her to "give medical school a second look" despite her family's insistence that she pursue a career in nursing.

Yet a new resistance to this assignment emerged in two students' pieces: two young women resisted analyzing their experiences through the lens of gender, opting instead to be "gender-blind." Resisting the very premise of the course—that our gendered experiences shape our lives in often subtle and sometimes sharp ways—shocked me. I had assumed that the readings, guest speakers, and discussions had persuaded them that the lens of gender might be a good tool to use in their analysis of their experiences. Clearly, I was wrong.

This resistance offers ways I would change how I teach the creative nonfiction project. First, I would spend at least an hour discussing *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *GirlDrive* in terms of how the writers link their experiences to their identities as women. I would ask students to find examples and ask them why being female mattered at any given point. I would point out that sometimes other salient identities (ethnicity, religion, social class) and roles (teacher, child, student) seem more influential. I would emphasize the fact that one need not identify as a feminist to analyze experience through the lens of gender. Then I would spend another hour discussing their scenes and experiences the same way. Finally, I would integrate a peer review session in which students help each other brainstorm these kinds of suggestions.

After Barst, Lane, and I finish grading, I am pleased to see that all of the students' reflections revealed initial resistance to but final excitement about the creative nonfiction project. Libby's artist statement, which accompanied her final piece, is typical:

Creative nonfiction is different from any other form of writing I have done in the past. I felt that it challenged me to investigate memories that may have been stuck in the corners of my mind and analyze them thoroughly. I relished the challenge of having to add in certain details where other logistics may have been forgotten. I enjoyed reminiscing with my mother to fill in the gaps of the events included in this piece of writing. It is truly amazing how the scenes that have previously happened in our lives continue to shape our values and futures.

Just as Libby feels this project challenged her to revise and analyze, my experience with honors students inspires me to reshape my teaching practice. I am reminded that some of the messy, in-process thinking about gender needs more time; I cannot assume that students will ramp their thinking through gendered lenses even in a feminist-framed course, but I am also reminded that this does not constitute failure, that even this resistance can be embraced by and be the subject of creative nonfiction.

CONCLUSION (JULIE M. BARST)

One of the challenges we built into the course was asking students to help shape the curriculum rather than passively listening to instructors and guest speakers. Honors students were prompted to delve into the texts in pairs and small groups, to write discussion agenda items, and to bring up topics they wanted to introduce or pursue further. A second challenge was asking students to listen to the voices of a wide variety of women and to explore gender through the lens of women in other cultures and from different identity groups. A third challenge was asking students to try non-formalized ways of expressing themselves through the creative nonfiction essay, the unstructured essay on *Reading Lolita*, and the visual poster presentation.

Because gender continues to shape our lives in so many significant ways, and because it can sometimes be overlooked within the disciplines that honors students pursue, we believe that honors programs should include women's studies courses in their curricula. Such courses can meet a wide variety of student learning outcomes, including enhanced critical thinking, improvement of oral and written communication skills, expansion of global perspectives, and understanding of how women can restructure and shape their lives. The creative nonfiction project challenged students to explore these broader concepts in a personal and innovative way. The team-taught format, with the addition of guest speakers, helped honors students see connections between and among disciplines.

In her final course evaluation, one student's comment was representative of the class in showing how the honors students moved from anxiety and resistance to enjoyment and confidence in approaching a new topic in new ways: "For how nervous I was about taking a gendered class, I enjoyed the content. The sheer variety of material was impressive." While women's studies courses have been part of most universities' curricula for at least four decades, they are perhaps less common in honors curricula. As our honors colloquium demonstrated, women's studies courses can help honors students—who are often tentative about venturing beyond their academic disciplines—explore and express their social, personal, and emotional lives in ways they find rare and rewarding.

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