

# The Course: Diversity Issues (Course Assignments)

## CULTURAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

### **GSS 1044 Diversity Issues**

#### **Writing Assignment # 1**

#### **Getting to know you - the Cultural Autobiography**

*"Men hate each other because they fear each other; they fear each other because they do not know each other; they do not know each other because they do not communicate; they do not communicate because they are separate."* Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Your first assignment is due on Monday September 13. This is a paper that describes you and your cultural identity and heritage in a maximum of two, typed, 1&1/2 spaced page. The autobiography could include information such as ethnic background, family structure, religious identification or practice, cultural traditions, other identification that is important to the way you see yourself such as gender identification, ability status, sub-cultural group, country of origin, region of the United States that you claim for your roots, etc. If you think that this is important you could include how your life experiences affect your relationships with and understanding of people who come from different cultural backgrounds.

The purpose of this assignment is to encourage you to reflect on events and life experiences that have shaped your cultural norms, and hopefully to share some of these reflections in class so that cultural diversity among you may be highlighted.

Your cultural autobiographies will be copied and given to your faculty/staff mentor who will sponsor you your during your cultural apprenticeship.

#### **Procedural Information**

If you have no idea how to begin this assignment here are some questions that will help you to think about the types of things that you may include.

- How would you define your cultural identity? Why do you choose to define yourself this way?
- Have there been experiences in your life when the way that you see yourself was in conflict with your ascribed identity placed on you by others? Explain
- What experiences in life have helped to form your cultural identity?
- How would you describe your family structure?
- What cultural celebrations or traditions are important to your family? What is the significance of these traditions? How do your feel about these traditions?
- In what ways has your culture been taught to you? Be specific

- How have your life experiences affected your relationships with, and understanding of persons who are culturally different from you?
- What programs/films do you watch?
- What recollections do you have of experiences of realizing there were ethnic differences between people? What stereotypes were you taught, and by whom?

**WRITING IT:** The format of the paper is open. You may choose to write it as a third person story; as an analysis of family, ethnic heritage, geographical location, religion, education, and the like; as a first person narration, or in any other format.

Cultural autobiography is a reflective, self-analytic story of your past and present.

First, **narrate** the life experiences that you consider of significance in shaping your view of your cultural self and if you have thought of it, your worldview. You may include typical and/or exceptional events from your childhood, school years, religious life, family life, etc.; memorable encounters with individuals of various backgrounds; etc.

Second, **analyze** how these experiences have shaped your culture--standards for thinking, valuing, behaving and evaluating, and **interpret** the cultural meanings of these experiences to you.

Lastly, **reflect** on the process of writing the cultural autobiography. How has this process helped you focus on your cultural self?

Here are some of the starting sentences from others:

*"I did not think that culture would apply to me but to others who were different"*

*"I am a Black woman, and that's how I like to define myself and how I want others to see me, everything else relates to that identity."*

*"I am visually impaired and that is the focus of my cultural difference. I am part of the culture of the disabled"*

*"I am a mutt. I have so many different ethnicities in my background"*

Some students had never considered themselves as cultural beings; rather they associated "culture" with minorities, immigrants, and foreigners. This view may have been influenced by the frequent usage of "multicultural" referring to something exotic and foreign. Other students felt that their limited experiences with people of color or different cultures made them culturally handicapped; thus were doubtful that this assignment would be in any way fruitful.

**GSS 1044**  
**Diversity Issues**  
**How to write a reaction paper**

A reaction paper is a reflection on an issue, reading, speaker, discussion, film, or any other stimulus. How do you do this? If you are unfamiliar with this type of writing these prompts may help you.

Consider the issue about which you will write, how do you **feel**? Focus on feeling, an emotion that this issue brings up for you. What are the possible emotions? Any feeling is legitimate, curiosity, anxiety, interest, fear, anger, confusion, boredom, disinterest, resentment, shame, any feeling that was evoked by the speaker, reading, discussion etc.

When you have identified your emotion try to locate the source or cause of it. Why do you think you have this feeling about the issue? You may not be able to identify the source but give it a try.

On a cognitive level, what do you **think** and **know** about the issue? This is less emotion and more intellectual. So for this question, tune it to your intellect, not emotion. What do you believe, perceive, understand, remember, or relate to this issue? What experiences have you had that are relevant? What skills do you have that relate? What information do you have that you think are associated with this issue? What things do you not understand clearly? Do you have relevant historical perspectives? Are your current perspectives different from the ones you held previously? Did you have misconceptions about this issue previously, if so, what were they?

How important do you perceive this issue to be, why and to whom? Is it important personally or generally, nationally or regionally?

What additional information would you like to have? You could do some further research and read additional sources on your topic for your reflection if you want to incorporate other perspectives.

When you put the answers to those questions and others of a similar nature together in a coherent fluid paper, you have a reaction paper that is reflective.

## **REQUIRED READING**

1. **The Spirit Catches You And You Fall Down – Anne Fadiman**  
from <http://www.spiritcatchesyou.com/bookdescription.htm>

On October 24, 1982, three-month-old Lia Lee was carried into the emergency room of the county hospital in Merced, California. Lia's parents, Hmong refugees from the hill country of Laos, spoke no English; the hospital staff spoke no Hmong. On a later visit, Lia's doctors would determine that she was suffering from a severe case of epilepsy, a misfiring of the brain's neurons. Her parents, however, believed that her seizures were caused by the flight of her soul from her body and called her condition by its Hmong name: qaug dab peg ("the spirit catches you and you fall down").